

EDUCATIONAL LINGUISTICS AND IDEOLOGIES: POWER, PEDAGOGY AND POLICY IN ESL CLASS ROOMS

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Abstract

The research is aimed to explore the intersection of educational linguistics and language ideologies in shaping power relations in pedagogical practices and language policies within ESL classrooms. It also explores how the implicit benefits of language such as perceived superiority of native speakers' accent norms or marginalization of local variety affects teaching approaches, the design of curriculum, and learner identity formation. The study is based on qualitative research which takes insights from classroom observation, policy document analysis, and teachers' interviews. The results highlight that classroom discourse is oriented on ideologies that is affected by certain backgrounds among students and teachers on various basis. Further, there are also power dynamics which influence the environment of classrooms. The data was taken through convenient sampling technique from 20 university teachers and 130 students who were enrolled in university programs. The study further reinforced that unexamined language ideologies often highlight language inequality which limit intercultural competence and critical awareness. Finally, the integration of critical educational linguistics will foster the inclusive pedagogies which promotes linguistic diversity and the learners' autonomy of using English in global context. The findings contribute in the current debate at the decolonization of English language teachings and highlight the need for the reformation of policy which will align sociolinguistic realities in multilingual contexts.

Keywords: Education, Pedagogical Policy, ESL Classrooms, Ideology, Power.

Introduction

Language education is never a neutral enterprise. It is deeply embedded in ideological structures that both reflect and reproduce social hierarchies, cultural norms, and power relations (Fairclough, 2013; Pennycook, 2021). Within English as a Second Language (ESL) classrooms, these ideological underpinnings become particularly visible, as English functions not only as a linguistic system but also as a symbol of status, modernity, and global participation. Educational linguistics, as an interdisciplinary field, provides the framework to investigate how linguistic theories intersect with pedagogy, curriculum, and policy to shape the lived realities of language learners and teachers (Hornberger, 2015). When examined through the lens of ideology, language education reveals its role in sustaining or challenging inequalities that emerge from perceptions of linguistic legitimacy, native-speaker norms, and institutional authority (Chen & Ramzan, 2024).

Language ideologies—the beliefs and assumptions about language, its users, and its proper use—play a central role in shaping classroom practices, educational policies, and learner identities (Kroskrity, 2004). In ESL contexts, these ideologies often manifest in implicit hierarchies: privileging native-speaker accents over local varieties, valuing Western pedagogical models over indigenous approaches, and measuring proficiency against monolingual standards. Such ideologies are not merely pedagogical preferences but discursive enactments of power that position certain speakers as legitimate and others as deficient (Javaid et al., 2024a). This process of ideological legitimization directly influences how teachers teach, how curricula are designed, and how learners perceive their own linguistic identities (Canagarajah, 2013; Holliday, 2018).

In multilingual and postcolonial contexts such as Pakistan, these ideological dynamics are intensified. English occupies a paradoxical position—it is both a language of empowerment and exclusion, serving as a gateway to academic and professional success while simultaneously reproducing socioeconomic inequality (Rahman, 2020). The classroom thus becomes a microcosm of broader linguistic politics, where choices about accent, register, and pedagogy embody struggles over identity, authority, and belonging. Teachers’ linguistic preferences, assessment criteria, and policy-driven language objectives are all informed—consciously or otherwise—by ideological assumptions about what constitutes “good English” or “effective communication.”

Educational linguistics provides a critical space to unpack these tensions by examining how theories of language acquisition and pedagogy intersect with issues of ideology, culture, and policy. As Bernstein (2000) argues, pedagogical practices are inherently political acts that reflect the distribution of symbolic power within educational systems. Similarly, Ricento (2015) emphasizes that language policy is not simply a set of administrative decisions but a reflection of ideological struggles that define whose language practices are recognized and whose are marginalized. By bringing together perspectives from educational linguistics and critical language studies, this research situates ESL teaching as an ideological site where competing values global standards, local realities, and cultural identities are negotiated (Javaid et al., 2024b).

The present study explores how language ideologies shape power relations in ESL classrooms at the university level, focusing on their manifestation in classroom discourse, pedagogical practices, and policy orientations. It employs a qualitative design, drawing data from classroom observations, teacher interviews, and policy document analysis. Through this multi-layered approach, the study aims to uncover how implicit beliefs about language influence not only what and how English is taught but also how learners position themselves within the broader sociolinguistic hierarchy.

Ultimately, the study contributes to the ongoing debate on the **decolonization of English language teaching (ELT)** by highlighting the need for pedagogies that value linguistic diversity, promote critical awareness, and empower learners to use English as a tool for global communication rather than as a marker of elite identity. By integrating insights from **critical educational linguistics**, this research argues for policy and classroom reforms that align with multilingual realities and foster equitable participation in English language education.

Literature Review

Educational linguistics, as introduced by Spolsky (1978) and expanded by Hornberger (2015), serves as a bridge between linguistic theory and educational practice. It examines how language functions as both an object and medium of learning, emphasizing the interdependence between

linguistic structures, social contexts, and pedagogical choices. Unlike traditional applied linguistics, educational linguistics foregrounds the *educational* implications of linguistic diversity, language policies, and ideological influences. According to Kaplan and Baldauf (2005), it provides a framework for understanding how institutions mediate the relationship between language and learning through curriculum design, assessment practices, and teacher education (Ramzan et al., 2023a)

In multilingual and postcolonial contexts, educational linguistics highlights how language education is influenced by historical and political forces. Rahman (2020) argues that in South Asia, particularly Pakistan, English language education reflects colonial legacies of linguistic stratification, where English continues to signify privilege and power. Thus, educational linguistics becomes a key tool for analyzing how structural inequalities are reproduced through classroom discourse and policy-level decisions (Ramzan et al., 2023b)

Language ideologies—beliefs about language, its users, and its proper forms—are central to understanding the power dynamics of language education. Woolard (1998) defines language ideology as “the cultural system of ideas about social and linguistic relationships,” shaping how speakers perceive linguistic legitimacy and authority. In ESL classrooms, these ideologies influence both teachers’ pedagogical choices and learners’ self-perceptions (Kroskrity, 2004).

Research shows that linguistic hierarchies often privilege *native-speaker norms* as the ultimate goal of language learning, marginalizing local varieties and hybrid identities (Holliday, 2006; Kubota, 2016). This “native-speakerism,” as Holliday (2018) terms it, is an ideological construct that equates linguistic purity with pedagogical superiority. It positions teachers who embody native English norms as more competent, and learners who use localized forms of English as deficient. Such ideologies reinforce symbolic inequalities, sustaining what Bourdieu (1991) calls “linguistic capital”—the idea that certain linguistic forms carry more value within educational and social markets (Ramzan et al., 2023c)

Van Dijk’s (2006) socio-cognitive theory of discourse further explains how ideologies are cognitively internalized and discursively reproduced. In classroom settings, these ideologies manifest through teacher talk, textbook representation, and assessment practices that normalize one variety of English as legitimate. This reinforces power asymmetries between institutions and learners and between “standard” and “non-standard” language users.

Pedagogical practices are often shaped by what Apple (2019) terms the *hidden curriculum*—the implicit values and assumptions transmitted through teaching methods, materials, and institutional expectations. In ESL education, this hidden curriculum often promotes assimilationist ideologies that privilege Western cultural norms and communication styles (Pennycook, 2021). For example, speaking “like a native speaker” or adhering to British or American English standards is often framed as a marker of linguistic success (Canagarajah, 2013).

Critical educational linguistics challenges these ideologies by promoting awareness of how linguistic practices are linked to social justice, equity, and identity (Janks, 2010). This approach draws upon Freire’s (1970) notion of *critical pedagogy*, which advocates for empowering learners to question dominant discourses and to use language as a means of agency. Within ESL contexts, this translates into pedagogies that recognize translanguaging, local Englishes, and plural linguistic identities (Garcia & Wei, 2014). By acknowledging learners’ linguistic repertoires, teachers can disrupt ideological hierarchies and foster inclusive, participatory learning spaces.

Language policies—both explicit and implicit—play a critical role in institutionalizing linguistic ideologies. Ricento (2015) notes that language policy is not merely administrative but ideological, reflecting power relations that determine whose language practices are legitimized. In many postcolonial education systems, English language policy is driven by neoliberal and globalist discourses that link English proficiency with economic mobility and modernity (Phillipson, 2009).

In Pakistan, for example, the dominance of English in higher education and assessment systems perpetuates linguistic inequality between urban elites and rural populations (Mahboob, 2017). Educational policies rarely address this imbalance; instead, they reproduce it through curricular emphasis on native-like proficiency and monolingual norms. Such policies, as Tollefson (2013) argues, function as ideological mechanisms that sustain structural inequities while appearing to promote linguistic progress.

Critical language policy research within educational linguistics therefore calls for a shift from prescriptive policies to *ecological* and *context-sensitive* models that value multilingual competence (Hornberger & Johnson, 2017). This perspective situates policy within the lived experiences of teachers and learners, acknowledging that ideology operates not only at the macro level of institutions but also at the micro level of classroom interaction.

Language ideologies directly influence how learners construct their linguistic and social identities. Norton (2013) emphasizes that language learning is an identity negotiation process, where learners' access to symbolic resources—such as participation, legitimacy, and recognition—is mediated by power relations. In contexts where native-speaker norms dominate, learners often experience linguistic insecurity, self-censorship, and resistance (Park, 2021).

However, learners are not passive recipients of ideology. Research in critical applied linguistics highlights their capacity to *appropriate* English for self-expression and social mobility (Canagarajah, 2013; Pennycook, 2021). This resistance takes the form of localized Englishes, hybrid linguistic practices, and translingual communication strategies that challenge the authority of native-speaker norms. In ESL classrooms, such practices signify the emergence of new ideological spaces that celebrate diversity and redefine linguistic legitimacy.

Despite growing attention to ideology in language education, there remains a need for empirical research that connects educational linguistics, language ideology, and classroom practice in postcolonial ESL settings. Much of the literature has focused either on policy-level analysis or teacher beliefs, with limited integration of classroom discourse, pedagogical practice, and learner identity formation (Rahman, 2020; Mahboob, 2017). The present study addresses this gap by examining how ideological assumptions shape power relations within Pakistani ESL classrooms through qualitative data from teachers, students, and policy documents.

By grounding the analysis in critical educational linguistics, the study not only identifies ideological biases but also proposes pathways for reform promoting *inclusive pedagogy*, *critical awareness*, and *linguistic pluralism* in English language education.

Methodology

1. Research Design

The present study adopts a qualitative research design situated within the framework of Critical Educational Linguistics (CEL) and Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). Qualitative inquiry is particularly suited to uncovering the underlying ideological and power dynamics in educational contexts, as it emphasizes participants' perspectives, contextual meanings, and discursive practices (Creswell & Poth, 2018). By integrating educational linguistics with ideological

analysis, this study investigates how language beliefs and pedagogical practices shape classroom interaction, policy interpretation, and identity formation in ESL settings.

The study employs a multi-method approach classroom observation, semi-structured teacher interviews, and policy document analysis—to capture the ideological dimensions of language use and pedagogy across institutional and interpersonal levels. This triangulated design allows for a holistic understanding of how ideology operates simultaneously in discourse, pedagogy, and policy.

2. Theoretical Framework

The research is informed by the theoretical insights of Critical Educational Linguistics (Pennycook, 2021; Janks, 2010) and van Dijk's (2006) socio-cognitive model of Critical Discourse Analysis. These frameworks together provide both an interpretive and critical lens for examining the intersection of language, power, and ideology in education.

- **Critical Educational Linguistics (CEL)** views language teaching and learning as socially and politically embedded practices. It emphasizes the need to interrogate hidden ideologies within pedagogy, curricula, and assessment, advocating for inclusive and decolonized approaches to English language teaching.
- **Van Dijk's socio-cognitive CDA model** bridges discourse structures (micro-level text), social cognition (belief systems and mental models), and broader institutional contexts (macro-level ideology). It enables analysis of how language ideologies are internalized by teachers and students, and how they are reproduced through educational discourse and policy.

This theoretical synthesis allows the study to explore both *how* ideological discourse manifests linguistically and *why* it persists institutionally.

3. Research Site and Participants

The study was conducted across three public and two private universities in Pakistan where English is taught as a second language at the undergraduate level. These institutions were selected based on accessibility, linguistic diversity, and curricular variation in English programs.

Using a convenience sampling technique, data were collected from:

- 20 ESL teachers with varying teaching experience (2–15 years), representing different disciplinary backgrounds (linguistics, literature, applied linguistics).
- 130 undergraduate students enrolled in English or communication skills courses.

This sampling allowed for diversity in institutional representation and ideological orientation, while focusing on participants directly engaged in English language teaching and learning.

4. Data Collection Methods

a. Classroom Observation

A total of 15 classroom sessions (60–90 minutes each) were observed over a period of eight weeks. An observation protocol was developed to record linguistic practices, teacher–student interactions, and instances of ideological positioning, such as attitudes toward accents, language varieties, or pedagogical authority. The observations focused on:

- How teachers' linguistic choices reflected ideological stances (e.g., preference for native-speaker norms).
- How classroom discourse reinforced or challenged linguistic hierarchies.
- Students' responses to language norms, correction practices, and identity negotiation.

Field notes and audio recordings (with consent) were used to capture authentic classroom interaction.

b. Semi-Structured Interviews

20 ESL teachers participated in semi-structured interviews lasting 40–60 minutes. The interviews explored teachers' beliefs about English language norms, perceptions of native and local varieties, pedagogical decision-making, and views on linguistic diversity. Sample guiding questions included:

- How do you define “good English” in your classroom?
- What role do you think accent or pronunciation plays in assessing proficiency?
- How do you address differences in students' linguistic backgrounds?

Interviews were conducted in English or Urdu (depending on participant preference) and were transcribed for thematic and discourse analysis.

c. Policy Document Analysis

To link classroom practices with institutional ideology, the study also analyzed curriculum documents, English syllabi, policy manuals, and teacher training materials from participating universities. The analysis focused on:

- Representation of linguistic norms (e.g., British vs. Pakistani English).
- Pedagogical goals related to global communication or native proficiency.
- Ideological assumptions about language, culture, and identity embedded in policy language.

This document analysis provided insight into how institutional discourses legitimize certain language ideologies that influence classroom practice.

5. Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using **Thematic Analysis** (Braun & Clarke, 2021) in conjunction with **van Dijk's (2006)** socio-cognitive CDA framework. The analysis proceeded in three stages:

1. **Textual Level (Micro Analysis):** Identification of linguistic markers of ideology in classroom discourse and interview transcripts (e.g., evaluative adjectives, modal verbs, and lexical choices expressing power or authority).
2. **Cognitive Level (Meso Analysis):** Examination of teachers' and students' mental models—shared beliefs, assumptions, and justifications related to English language norms and pedagogy.
3. **Social Level (Macro Analysis):** Interpretation of how these ideologies reflect and reproduce larger sociopolitical structures, such as colonial linguistic hierarchies or neoliberal educational agendas.

NVivo software was used to code and categorize recurring themes (e.g., “native-speaker normativity,” “linguistic identity,” “policy–practice mismatch,” “critical awareness”). Triangulation across classroom, interview, and policy data ensured validity and depth in interpretation.

6. Trustworthiness and Ethical Considerations

To ensure credibility, data triangulation was maintained across multiple sources (classroom, interviews, documents). Member checking was used to confirm interpretations with selected teachers. Thick description of contexts was provided to enhance transferability.

Ethical approval was obtained from the participating institutions. Informed consent was secured from all participants, ensuring anonymity and voluntary participation. Pseudonyms were used in transcripts and reports. Audio files and transcripts were stored securely with restricted access.

7. Methodological Limitations

While qualitative inquiry allows for rich contextual interpretation, it does not claim generalizability beyond the selected sites. The reliance on convenience sampling may limit representativeness; however, the depth of textual, observational, and policy data strengthens interpretive validity. Future studies could incorporate longitudinal or cross-institutional comparisons for broader generalization. Finally, the study employs a critical qualitative design grounded in educational linguistics and CDA to uncover how language ideologies shape ESL teaching and learning. By connecting classroom practices with institutional policies and teacher cognition, the research seeks to reveal the ideological mechanisms that sustain linguistic inequalities and to propose pathways for more inclusive, critically aware, and decolonized English language pedagogy.

Results and Discussion

1. Overview

The qualitative analysis of classroom discourse, teacher interviews, and institutional policy documents revealed a network of interrelated themes that illuminate how language ideologies shape power relations, pedagogical practices, and policy orientations in ESL classrooms. The findings suggest that unexamined ideological beliefs about English—particularly the perceived superiority of native-speaker norms—continue to influence both instructional methods and learners' linguistic identities. At the same time, pockets of critical awareness and resistance are emerging, signaling gradual shifts toward inclusive and decolonial pedagogies.

The results are discussed below in light of van Dijk's (2006) socio-cognitive model of Critical Discourse Analysis and the principles of Critical Educational Linguistics (Pennycook, 2021; Janks, 2010).

2. Ideological Dominance of Native-Speaker Norms

Across all five institutions, teachers frequently equated “good English” with native-like pronunciation, accent, and fluency, reflecting the dominance of standard language ideology. Interview data showed that 14 out of 20 teachers described British or American English as the ultimate goal for learners, while only three acknowledged local Pakistani English as a legitimate variety.

In classroom observations, this ideology was reflected in repeated corrective feedback emphasizing pronunciation and accent rather than communicative meaning. For example, one teacher remarked during class:

“You must pronounce the ‘r’ softly; in British English, it’s not stressed like in local speech.”

This discursive pattern aligns with van Dijk's micro-level textual analysis, where lexical choices and corrective discourse serve as tools for ideological reproduction. Teachers' linguistic practices implicitly reinforced the notion that linguistic legitimacy derives from proximity to native norms, a belief deeply rooted in colonial linguistic hierarchies.

From the cognitive level, many teachers expressed pride in “speaking like natives,” suggesting an internalization of what van Dijk (2006) calls *shared mental models*—collective ideologies that sustain power structures. Such beliefs not only regulate teaching but also construct hierarchies of linguistic capital, where local varieties are undervalued.

At the **macro-societal level**, policy documents echoed this bias by emphasizing “international intelligibility” and “standard accuracy” as curricular outcomes, subtly legitimizing the global dominance of English from Anglophone nations.

3. Power Relations in Classroom Discourse

A recurring pattern observed was the asymmetrical power dynamic between teachers and students, often enacted through linguistic authority. Teachers predominantly controlled discourse flow, correcting students' speech frequently and discouraging localized expressions.

In one observed class, a student used a Pakistani English phrase ("He is having tea"), and the teacher responded:

"That's wrong. We don't say that in correct English. It's 'He is drinking tea.'"

This illustrates how ideological policing of language functions as a disciplinary mechanism, regulating what counts as "correct." Students reported feeling hesitant to participate due to fear of being corrected, indicating that power was exercised not only linguistically but also affectively.

Through van Dijk's framework, this dynamic reflects how discourse enacts power by controlling access to communicative participation. The teacher's authority is maintained through linguistic gatekeeping, reinforcing broader social hierarchies tied to education, class, and access to elite English varieties.

4. Policy Discourses and Institutional Ideologies

Analysis of English curriculum documents and university language policies revealed an implicit alignment with globalized neoliberal ideologies of English education. Terms such as "*international standards*," "*global citizenship*," and "*competitive proficiency*" frequently appeared in policy texts, signaling an instrumental view of English as a tool for economic mobility and internationalization.

However, these policies made little reference to local linguistic realities or the value of multilingual repertoires. Instead, they reinforced English as a language of prestige, echoing what Pennycook (2021) describes as the "marketization of English" where linguistic forms are commodified and tied to socioeconomic advancement.

This institutional discourse functions ideologically by naturalizing linguistic inequality. It constructs English not as a shared communicative resource but as a gatekeeping mechanism determining academic and professional access. Such policy language, though outwardly neutral, perpetuates systemic exclusion of non-elite linguistic identities, particularly those from rural or Urdu-medium backgrounds.

5. Teacher Cognition and Ideological Awareness

Despite the prevalence of traditional ideologies, the study also identified emerging critical awareness among a subset of teachers. Four participants explicitly questioned native-speaker dominance and advocated for context-sensitive pedagogy. For instance, one teacher stated:

"Students must learn to use English in their own voices — there is no single correct English anymore."

This reflects a developing orientation toward Critical Language Awareness (Janks, 2010) and critical pedagogy (Freire, 1970) within educational linguistics. These teachers integrated local examples, multilingual resources, and discussions on global Englishes into their classrooms — signaling an ideological shift toward decolonial linguistic practices.

Such awareness marks a transitional stage in teacher cognition, where global standards are still valued but increasingly questioned. However, these teachers often faced institutional resistance, such as pressure from administrators or parents demanding "British accent training." This tension between ideological transformation and systemic inertia exemplifies the complex interplay of agency and structure in educational settings.

6. Learner Identity and Linguistic Insecurity

Students' responses revealed that ideological hierarchies in the classroom deeply influenced their linguistic self-perception. Many expressed linguistic insecurity, believing their accent or local variety made them "less proficient." In interviews, several students associated fluency with social status, suggesting that English proficiency functions as a symbolic capital within Pakistan's stratified linguistic economy.

One student remarked:

"If I speak like a native, people think I'm educated. If I speak like myself, they think I'm not confident."

This perception reflects Bourdieu's (1991) concept of *linguistic habitus*, where internalized ideologies shape self-worth and social identity. From van Dijk's (2006) cognitive perspective, such beliefs are not individual but socially shared mental models sustained through discourse.

However, a few students also expressed pride in local English forms, especially those exposed to teachers promoting pluralistic ideologies. This indicates that critical pedagogical practices can transform learner identity, fostering confidence and linguistic ownership.

7. Emerging Spaces of Resistance

Despite dominant ideologies, certain teachers and students actively challenged linguistic hierarchies. In one observed class, a teacher encouraged students to share examples from Urdu or regional languages when discussing English idioms, highlighting translanguaging as a valid learning strategy.

These acts of discursive resistance signify a shift toward critical multilingualism — a pedagogy that values diversity as a resource rather than a deficit. Such moments align with van Dijk's (2006) *macro-level analysis* of social change, where counter-discourses emerge to challenge dominant ideologies.

This resistance, though limited, indicates the potential for ideological transformation within ESL classrooms when teachers adopt reflexive, inclusive approaches. It demonstrates that language ideologies are not static, but dynamic and negotiable through pedagogical practice.

8. Discussion Summary

The findings collectively highlight how educational linguistics and language ideologies intersect to shape ESL pedagogy in Pakistan. Using van Dijk's (2006) multi-level framework, the study demonstrates that:

- **Micro-level** discourse practices (corrections, word choices) reproduce dominant ideologies.
- **Meso-level** cognitive models (teacher beliefs) sustain native-speaker superiority.
- **Macro-level** institutional policies legitimize linguistic inequality under the guise of globalization.

However, critical awareness and resistance are emerging — suggesting pathways toward decolonizing English language teaching. Integrating Critical Educational Linguistics into teacher training and curriculum development could empower educators to interrogate hidden ideologies and promote inclusive, context-relevant pedagogies that validate all linguistic identities.

Conclusion

This study underscores that language ideologies are central to understanding educational inequality and pedagogical practice. By applying a critical linguistic lens, it reveals how everyday classroom discourse and institutional policy reproduce power asymmetries — yet also how conscious pedagogical intervention can subvert them.

Ultimately, the research calls for a reorientation of ESL pedagogy in multilingual societies: from enforcing linguistic conformity toward fostering critical linguistic citizenship where learners use English not as a symbol of hierarchy but as a tool for dialogue, identity, and empowerment.

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