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Testing, Markets, and the Transformation of English in Bangladesh

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Research Article

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Abstract

This study examined how testing regimes and market forces shaped assessment practices, teacher agency, and English's sociolinguistic construction across three institutional contexts in Bangladesh using semi-structured interviews, particularly how assessment practices produced different forms of legitimate English. The findings revealed that public schools privileged board exam English. Private English-medium schools promoted globally benchmarked English linked to international curricula and parental expectations. Meanwhile, coaching centers emphasized test-score English driven by IELTS/TOEFL preparation and market accountability. Across contexts, English operated as a stratified linguistic capital, commodified through institutional reputation, parental investment, score production, and mobility aspirations. Teachers experienced constrained autonomy, but exercised situated agency through compliance, adaptation, pedagogical hybridity, and micro-resistance. Overall, this study provides an interpretive account of how selected teachers negotiated assessment-driven language ideologies.

Introduction

The role of English in Bangladesh has significantly evolved since its independence in 1971. Besides being a medium of access to global knowledge, English has been a key resource for socioeconomic mobility and international participation (Hamid, 2016; Rahman & Pandian, 2018). However, access to and control over English remain unevenly distributed across institutional and social contexts, reflecting broader sociolinguistic inequalities. This uneven distribution can be understood through the notion of linguistic markets, wherein English' value is shaped by the institutions authorizing, assessing, and rewarding its particular forms (Park & Wee, 2012). Here, its different forms are hierarchically valued, depending on class position, institutional access, and assessment regimes (Tupas, 2015). Similarly, across Asia, English is shaped by complex interactions between local practices, global norms, and shifting language ideologies (Kirkpatrick, 2021; Rose & Galloway, 2019; Tupas, 2023). In Asia, English is increasingly embedded in transnational mobility, digital communication, and evolving multilingual practices (Fang & Widodo, 2019).

English language education in Bangladesh has been increasingly influenced by neoliberal policy reforms, particularly since the 1990s. They emphasize standardization, accountability, and performance measurement, aligning education with the market-oriented logics of efficiency, competition, and measurable outcomes (Ball, 2012; Kabir & Chowdhury, 2017; Sultana, 2018). Besides restructuring educational systems, neoliberalism also reshapes language practices by privileging standardized and measurable forms of English over contextually grounded and communicative uses (Barnawi et al., 2023; Orelus et al., 2023; Block et al., 2012). Thus, besides being a pedagogical tool, English is a mechanism through which particular norms of English are legitimized, ranked, and reproduced (Cheng et al., 2022; Fulcher, 2023; Shohamy, 2001).

In Bangladesh, high-stakes examinations like Secondary School Certificate (SSC), Higher Secondary Certificate (HSC), and international tests like IELTS have intensified an exam-oriented culture in English language teaching (Ali et al., 2022; Liang et al., 2025). Standardized testing produces strong washback effects, encourages teaching to the test, and often constrains communicative and learner-centered approaches (Morrow, 2018; Puspitasari, 2024; You et al., 2019). Marketization and privatization have also contributed to the language's commodification, particularly through English-medium schooling, private tutoring, and the test preparation industry (Hamid, 2016; Kabir & Chowdhury, 2017; Sultana, 2018).

However, how these pressures comparatively operate across different institutional sites and produce different versions of "legitimate English" remains less understood. Studies typically examine washback, language policy, neoliberalism, or English education as separate issues, or focus on a particular institutional sector. Meanwhile, how

public schools, private English-medium institutions, and coaching centers function as distinct sociolinguistic spaces where English is assessed, valued, and commodified in different ways remains underexplored. Rather than simply implementing assessment policy uniformly, they mediate competing pressures from the state, international testing regimes, parental expectations, and market demand. Consequently, each setting may produce a different hierarchy of English: board exam English in public schools, globally benchmarked English in English-medium institutions, and score-oriented test English in coaching centers.

This study adopts a critical sociolinguistic perspective to examine how neoliberal educational policies are enacted through assessment practices in English as a second (ESL)/foreign language (EFL) classrooms in Bangladesh. By focusing on teachers' experiences across the three aforementioned settings, this study investigates how different assessment regimes shape teacher agency, classroom practices, and the construction of legitimate English. It contributes to debates in Asian sociolinguistics by demonstrating how English is continuously reconfigured as a stratified and commodified resource under neoliberal conditions. Teachers emerge as key mediators of competing language ideologies, including in how they negotiate, reproduce, and sometimes resist assessment regimes defining which forms of English are institutionally recognized and rewarded.

The following research questions guided the inquiry:

1. How do high-stakes English language assessments shape ESL/EFL teachers' assessment and classroom language practices across the three institutional contexts?
2. How do market-oriented forces, including parental expectations, institutional competition, and test preparation demands, influence English's value and commodification across these contexts?
3. How do assessment regimes and market pressures construct particular forms of legitimate English, and how do teachers negotiate, reproduce, or resist these constructions in their classroom practices?

Literature Review

English as Linguistic Capital and Sociolinguistic Stratification in Bangladesh

Linguistic capital refers to the value attached to particular language practices when they are recognized and rewarded by schools, examinations, employers, and wider social institutions (Bourdieu, 1991). In Bangladesh, English is associated with academic success, employability, global mobility, and social distinction (Hamid, 2016; Rahman & Pandian, 2018). However, this value is unevenly distributed across educational spaces because access to English, quality instruction, and recognized assessment credentials are shaped by institutional resources, class positions, and examination systems (Kabir & Chowdhury, 2021).

This study considers public schools, private English-medium schools, and coaching centers as the different institutional sites where English takes on different forms of value, such as national examination success; elite educational distinction and global mobility; and test scores and measurable outcomes, respectively. Park and Wee's (2012) idea of the "markets of English" helps explain how English gains value through institutional systems which authorize and reward particular forms of language. Tupas's (2015) concept of unequal Englishes highlights that these forms are not equally valued: Some Englishes become institutionally privileged; others are treated as less legitimate or useful. This framework connects linguistic capital to the study's comparative focus by showing how assessment practices can reproduce educational inequality by producing different forms of "legitimate English."

Neoliberalism, Markets, and English's Commodification

Neoliberalism has reshaped education by emphasizing competition, accountability, efficiency, and measurable performance (Ball et al., 2012; Block et al., 2012). In language education, these logics are visible in the expansion of private institutions, global testing systems, performance indicators, and consumer-oriented educational services (Barnawi et al., 2023; Orelus et al., 2023). Therefore, English is increasingly positioned not only as a communicative resource but also as a marketable asset linked to employability, mobility, institutional reputation, and test performance.

From a political-economy perspective, language becomes commodified when its value is reorganized around exchange, profit, and institutional competitiveness (Heller, 2010; Duchêne & Heller, 2012). In Bangladesh, this is evident in private English-medium education and test preparation markets: English proficiency is presented as an investment in future academic, professional, or migration opportunities, shifting its value from broader communicative and social use toward standardized, measurable, and commercially recognizable outcomes (Park & Wee, 2012).

Language Assessment, Washback, and English's Standardization

Pedagogically, washback refers to testing's influence on teaching and learning, particularly in high-stakes contexts wherein test results carry institutional or social consequences (Alderson & Wall, 1993; Green, 2013; Cheng et al., 2022). Here, teachers often organize instruction around testing aspects like test formats or timed performance. Consequently, classroom practices may become increasingly focused on testable skills, like grammar accuracy, reading comprehension, and formulaic writing. Meanwhile communicative, creative, and socioculturally situated uses of English remain underappreciated (Morrow, 2018; Puspitasari, 2024).

Washback has sociolinguistic consequences. When particular test formats and scoring rubrics repeatedly reward certain forms of English, they begin defining what counts as correct, valuable, and legitimate. The standard language ideology, treating particular forms of language as naturally correct, neutral, and authoritative, is helpful here, although such standards are socially and institutionally produced (Milroy & Milroy, 2012; Lippi-Green, 2012). From a language ideology perspective, assessment systems participate in linguistic differentiation by making some forms of English recognizable as legitimate, while rendering others inappropriate, deficient, or invisible (Irvine & Gal, 2000; Kroskrity, 2000).

Therefore, language tests function as tools for measuring proficiency, and policy instruments regulating language practices through institutional rewards and penalties (Shohamy, 2001; Fulcher, 2023). In neoliberal education systems, score-based accountability intensifies this process by linking "good English" to measurable outcomes, rankings, mobility, and market value. Thus, assessment systems help construct "legitimate English" by embedding particular language ideologies into test design, classroom routines, institutional expectations, and students' aspirations.

Teacher Agency and the Negotiation of Language Practices

Teacher agency encompasses teachers' capacity to act within, respond to, and negotiate institutional and policy constraints. It is shaped by professional beliefs, institutional conditions, and assessment demands, among others (Biesta & Tedder, 2007; Priestley et al., 2015). This perspective is useful because ESL/EFL teachers in Bangladesh work within assessment regimes shaped by high-stakes testing, accountability, market pressure, and competing English ideologies.

To analyze agency, this study uses four operational categories: compliance, adaptation, pedagogical hybridity, and resistance. Compliance entails teachers following official assessment requirements with limited modification. Adaptation involves practical adjustments which help students succeed within existing assessment structures. Pedagogical hybridity covers practices combining examination-oriented requirements with broader communicative or learner-centered goals. Resistance encompasses informal or partially disruptive practices, like ungraded speaking tasks, which create limited space for alternative language practices within restrictive systems (Menken & García, 2010; Ball et al., 2012).

These categories connect teacher agency with language ideology. Compliance may reproduce ideologies of correctness and testable English; adaptation, hybridity, and resistance may open a limited space for more communicative, contextual, and student-centered forms of English. Hence, teacher agency is central to understanding how assessment-driven language ideologies are reproduced, negotiated, and challenged in various institutional contexts.

Analytical Framework

This study operationalizes neo-liberalism, washback, linguistic capital, language ideology, and teacher agency as connected analytical lenses. Neoliberal marketization and accountability are traced through testing regimes, institutional performance demands, parental expectations, and coaching center markets. Washback and tests-as-policy help analyze how test formats, marking schemes, model answers, and scores define which forms of English are treated as correct, valuable, or legitimate (Shohamy, 2001; Cheng et al., 2022). Linguistic capital and English markets help explain how board exam, globally benchmarked, and test score English gain different institutional values (Bourdieu, 1991; Park & Wee, 2012). Teacher agency is traced through compliance, adaptation, pedagogical hybridity, and resistance (Biesta, 2015; Priestley et al., 2015).

Study Design: Qualitative Comparative Case Studies

This study adopted a qualitative comparative case study design. The cases were defined as bounded institutional contexts rather than merely the individual teacher (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Yin, 2023): public schools, private English-medium schools, and private coaching centers. Two ESL/EFL teachers from each setting participated, offering situated accounts of how assessment practices were experienced, interpreted, and negotiated within each.

Comparative case study research can help examine how broader policy processes take different forms across social and institutional sites (Bartlett & Vavrus, 2017). From a sociolinguistic perspective, this approach also helped in analyzing how macro-level policy discourses intersected with classroom assessment practices, institutional expectations, and local language ideologies (Blommaert, 2010; Heller, 2011).

These three cases represent distinct sites where English is assessed, valued, and legitimized in Bangladesh. Public schools are mainly shaped by national examinations. Private English-medium schools are influenced by international curricula, parental expectations, and institutional branding. Coaching centers are driven by test-preparation markets and score-based outcomes. Comparing them helped examine how different forms of legitimate English are produced: board exam, globally benchmarked, and test-score English. Within and across cases, teachers' accounts were analyzed to trace how they complied with, adapted to, hybridized, or resisted dominant assessment expectations, highlighting teacher agency as a situated response to institutional and policy constraints (Biesta, 2015; Priestley et al., 2015).

Participants

As shown in Table 1, the six participants had at least three years of teaching experience and were directly involved in English assessment.

Table 1
Participant Profile

Pseudonym	Institutional Setting	Teaching Level / Context	Experience	Assessment Role	Curriculum / Exam Context	Main Assessment Demand
Rahim	Public school	Secondary ESL/EFL	3 + years	Designs class tests; prepares students for board exams	National curriculum; SSC-oriented assessment	Board question patterns; pass rates; national exam performance
Salma	Public school	Higher secondary ESL/EFL	3 + years	Conducts written tests; prepares students for HSC English	National curriculum; HSC-oriented assessment	Curriculum compliance; exam preparation; school results
Farhana	Private English-medium school	Secondary English/ESL	3 + years	Uses rubrics, projects, writing tasks, and exam preparation	International curriculum; Cambridge/school-based assessment	International benchmarks; parental expectations; school reputation
Imran	Private English-medium school	O/A Level or equivalent English	3 + years	Designs formative and summative assessments	International curriculum; Cambridge/IELTS-related expectations	External exam performance; parent reporting; institutional branding
Fariza	Private coaching center	IELTS/test-preparation English	3 + years	Conducts mock tests and diagnostic feedback	IELTS/high-stakes test preparation	Band-score improvement; student satisfaction; market competition
Hasan	Private coaching center	TOEFL / IELTS / spoken English preparation	3 + years	Uses practice tests, drills, and score-based remediation	Coaching-based assessment; international proficiency tests	Measurable score gains; client expectations; institutional success rates

Research Instrument

Semi-structured interviews were used because they provided consistency across participants, while allowing flexibility in exploring teachers' context-specific experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015). The interview

protocol covered four areas: assessment practices and language beliefs; influence of high-stakes testing; market forces, accountability, and the commodification of English; and teacher agency in negotiating policy constraints.

Each interview lasted approximately 45–60 minutes; was conducted either face-to-face or online; and was audio recorded with consent, transcribed verbatim, and translated as necessary.

Relevant documents, including curriculum guidelines, sample assessment materials, examination formats, and policy texts, were reviewed for contextually understanding the assessment environments (Bowen, 2009).

Data Analysis Procedures

Staged thematic analysis was used for data analysis, combining inductive coding with deductive concepts from the analytical framework (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Gibbs, 2018). After transcription, the data were read several times to identify early patterns related to exam pressure, institutional expectations, assessment formats, teacher autonomy, parental demands, and views of “good” or “correct” English (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

The initial codes were manually generated. Some inductive codes were “following board question patterns” and “parents expect visible scores.” Guided by the framework, deductive codes included standardization, accountability, commodification, legitimate English, and teacher agency.

Related codes were grouped into broader themes. Codes like “board exam pattern” and “model answers” informed the theme of assessment standardization. Codes like “parental pressure” and “band-score accountability” informed marketization and commodification. Codes like “testable English” and “global English” informed the analysis of legitimate English. Codes related to, say, “informal assessment” or “creative tasks,” were grouped under teacher agency, including compliance, adaptation, pedagogical hybridity, and resistance.

Themes were refined through within- and cross-case comparisons (Yin, 2023). Within each case, the analysis examined how teachers described assessment expectations and classroom practices. Across cases, it compared how national examinations, international curricula, and coaching-based market pressures shaped different assessment practices and forms of legitimate English.

To strengthen consistency, codes and themes were revisited several times by the researcher. A coding record was maintained to document how codes were combined, revised, or renamed (Saldaña, 2021). Member checking was conducted by sharing selected summaries of interpretations and emerging themes with participants. Their feedback helped clarify meanings, correct possible misunderstandings, and ensure that the analysis reflected their experiences (Patton, 2015; Nowell et al., 2017).

Results

As summarized in Table 2, four interrelated themes emerged: standardized testing and the narrowing of English language practices; market forces and English commodification; constructing “legitimate English” through assessment; and teacher agency in negotiating assessment pressures. These themes were interpreted through the study’s critical sociolinguistic framework, which views assessment both as a pedagogical practice and as a mechanism through which English is standardized, valued, and legitimized under neoliberal conditions (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Shohamy, 2001; Cheng et al., 2022).

Table 2
Cross-Case Summary of Findings

Institutional case	Dominant assessment regime	Form of English legitimized	Accountability logic	Dominant form of teacher agency
Public schools	SSC/HSC-oriented national examination system	Board-exam English: written, patterned, grammar-focused, and syllabus-bound	Bureaucratic accountability through pass rates, school rankings, and curriculum compliance	Compliance with exam formats, alongside micro-resistance through informal oral tasks, ungraded feedback, and limited communicative activities
Private English-medium schools	International curricula, school-based assessment, Cambridge/IELTS-related expectations	Globally benchmarked English: standardized, polished, internationally recognizable, and performance-based	Dual accountability to school reputation and parental expectations	Pedagogical hybridity through combining rubric-based assessment with communicative or creative tasks
Private coaching centers	IELTS/TOEFL and test-preparation markets	Test-score English: measurable, strategic, timed, and band-score oriented	Market accountability through score improvement, client satisfaction, and institutional success rates	Strategic adaptation focused on mock tests, drills, diagnostics, and score optimization

Note. SSC = Secondary School Certificate; HSC = Higher Secondary Certificate; IELTS = International English Language Testing System; TOEFL = Test of English as a Foreign Language.

Theme 1: Standardized Testing and the Narrowing of English Language Practices

Across contexts, teachers described high-stakes testing as the strongest force shaping assessment practices. However, the form and intensity of this influence varied by institutional setting. In public schools, national examinations narrowed English teaching toward predictable question formats, grammatical accuracy, and written performance. Rahim, a public school teacher, explained:

We mostly prepare students for the exam format; there is very little space to go beyond that. If we teach something different, it does not help them in the exam. Students are trained to answer in a fixed structure. If they write creatively, it is often marked wrong because it does not match the expected answer. So, even when I want them to use English more freely, I have to bring them back to the board pattern.

Thus, besides being a teaching strategy, exam preparation functioned as a mechanism for regulating acceptable language use. His phrase “very little space” signals constrained pedagogical autonomy, while “fixed structure” and “board pattern” reveal how assessment formats define what counts as acceptable English. Creativity is not simply excluded; it becomes risky because it may not correspond to the expected answer. This reflects the washback effect of high-stakes assessment, wherein test formats, marking schemes, and expected responses shape classroom pedagogy and limit communicative language use (Green, 2013; Cheng et al., 2022).

Salma, another public school teacher, similarly emphasized the dominance of past questions and syllabus completion:

We follow past questions very closely. Students practice the same type again and again because that is what will come in the exam. Speaking is important, but since it is not in the exam, we don't focus on it much. If we spend time on communication, we cannot complete the syllabus for the exam. So, the students learn how to answer, but not always how to use English in real situations.

Clearly, the examination system produced a hierarchy of language skills. While speaking is acknowledged as "important," it is marginalized because it is not formally assessed. Still, teachers may value communicative competence when reproducing examination-oriented practices. The contrast between how to answer and use English is significant because it distinguishes examination performance from broader language ability. Here, public school assessment constructs English as a written, syllabus-bound, and examinable subject rather than as a communicative resource.

In private English-medium schools, standardized testing also shapes assessment, but through international curricula and external examination expectations rather than national board exams. Farhana, a private English-medium school teacher, explained:

We try to include speaking and writing tasks beyond exam preparation, but the tasks must still fit the assessment criteria. Parents and school leaders want to see results, so even creative work has to be connected to marks. If I design a presentation or group task, I still need to show how it supports the rubric or the exam outcome.

Thus suggests greater pedagogical flexibility than public schools but also shows how innovation remains tied to measurable outcomes. The phrase "connected to the marks" demonstrates how creative and communicative tasks become institutionally acceptable only when translated into assessment criteria. This reflects pedagogical hybridity: Private school teachers may include broader language practices, but these must align with rubrics, external standards, and institutional expectations.

Coaching centers exhibited the most explicit narrowing of English language practices. Fariza, an IELTS preparation teacher, described assessment as almost entirely test-driven:

Everything is exam-oriented. We give model answers, students memorize them, and then we test again. We train students to identify patterns in questions and answers. It is about speed and accuracy, not communication. Students come with a target band score, so our teaching also follows that target.

This shows how English is transformed into a technical skillset. The emphasis on "model answers," "patterns," "speed," "accuracy," and "target band score" reduces English to measurable performance under test conditions. Communication is explicitly displaced by test efficiency.

Overall, standardized testing narrows English across all three settings, especially in coaching centers where the entire instructional model is organized around score production. Thus, besides measuring language ability, high-stakes assessments also reshape classroom language practices and privilege testable forms of English (Shohamy, 2001; Fulcher, 2023).

Theme 2: Market Forces and English's Commodification

While public schools were more strongly shaped by bureaucratic accountability, private institutions and coaching centers were shaped by market forces lik parental expectations, institutional reputation, and competitive performance, reflecting broader neoliberal processes of English becoming a form of linguistic capital tied to mobility, employability, and institutional prestige (Bourdieu, 1991; Tupas, 2023).

In private English-medium schools, teachers described English as a resource connected to future opportunities and social advantages. Imran, who designed both formative and summative assessments in an O/A Level context, explained:

Parents want results. They want their children to perform well in international exams, so we have to focus on that. We are not only teaching English; we are preparing students for future opportunities, so everything is result-oriented. Parents see English as something that will help their children go abroad, enter good universities, or get better jobs.

This shows how English operates as a linguistic capital, valued both as a communicative resource, and an investment in educational mobility, global belonging, and future employment. His phrase "future opportunities" positions English as a resource with exchange value. Meanwhile, "everything is result-oriented" indicates how this investment logic transforms assessment into evidence of institutional value. English must be demonstrated through visible outcomes, especially examination results.

Farhana also connected assessment to school reputation:

The school's reputation depends on students' performance. So we cannot ignore exam results, even if we want to focus more on communication. Parents compare schools, and results become part of that comparison. We may believe in broader learning, but the school also has to show success.

This excerpt captures a key tension in private English-medium schools. Farhana's phrase "even if we want to" signals constrained agency: Teachers may value communicative and learner-centered practices, but institutional branding depends on visible performance. Here, assessment becomes a public display of school quality. Besides tuition and parental investment, English is also commodified through institutional competition.

In coaching centers, commodification was more direct and transactional. Hasan stated:

Students come here for results. They pay for improvement in scores. If scores don't improve, they leave. So, we have to show progress quickly. The students and parents are not interested in general English development; they want a band score.

English is explicitly framed as a purchased service. Assessment guarantees market value, with the teacher's role tied to customer satisfaction. Hasan's distinction between "general English development" and "a band score" shows how the coaching-center market transforms English into test-score capital. These accounts illustrate English's commodification, wherein language learning is reorganized as a paid service and English proficiency becomes valuable through measurable exchange outcomes like IELTS or TOEFL scores (Heller, 2010; Duchêne & Heller, 2012; Park & Wee, 2012).

Importantly, commodification was not uniform across the cases. Public schools were less directly marketized but remained shaped by performance indicators. Private English-medium schools occupied a hybrid space, balancing educational aims with parental investment and institutional branding. Coaching centers represented the most fully marketized context. This variation shows how neoliberal market forces differently stratify English across institutional spaces.

Theme 3: Reconfiguring "Legitimate English" Through Assessment

Across contexts, legitimacy was strongly tied to conformity with exam formats, marking schemes, rubrics, and expected answer patterns. This finding is central to the study's critical sociolinguistic argument: Rather than merely

evaluating English proficiency, assessment helped produce institutional norms of English. Language tests can function as policy tools by defining which language practices are rewarded or marginalized (Shohamy, 2001; Fulcher, 2023).

English's standardization through assessment can also be understood through standard language ideology, which treats particular language forms as naturally correct, neutral, and authoritative, although such standards are socially and institutionally produced (Milroy & Milroy, 2012; Lippi-Green, 2012). From a language ideology perspective, assessment systems participate in linguistic differentiation by making some forms of English recognizable as legitimate, while rendering others inappropriate, deficient, or invisible (Irvine & Gal, 2000; Kroskrity, 2000). Such differentiation was indeed visible in how teachers described exam-compatible English as safer, more valuable, and more institutionally recognized than creative, oral, localized, or communicative forms of English.

In public schools, legitimate English was closely linked to national examination requirements. Salma explained:

If students write differently, even if it is correct, it may not get marks because it does not follow the marking scheme. Students are trained to follow a fixed pattern. Creativity is risky because it may not match what the examiner expects. So, we teach students to be safe in their answers.

This reveals a tension between linguistic correctness and assessment legitimacy. Salma's phrase "creativity is risky" is especially important because it shows how assessment discourages linguistic variation. Her phrase "safe in their answers" further suggests that students learn to avoid experimentation. Here, legitimate English is both accurate and exam-compatible English. This reflects the standard language ideology because the exam format is treated as a neutral measure of correctness, despite privileging a narrow, institutionally authorized version of English (Milroy & Milroy, 2012; Lippi-Green, 2012).

In private English-medium schools, legitimacy was shaped by international standards and examiner expectations. Imran explained:

We teach students how to answer in a way that examiners expect. That is what matters. Even when students have good ideas, we guide them to structure their answers in a standard way so they can secure marks. The content may be good, but if the structure is not acceptable, they lose marks.

Thus, private school teachers mediate between students' ideas and standardized international assessment expectations. The phrase "that is what matters" indicates external assessment norm-driven legitimacy. Students' ideas are valued, but must be repackaged into examiner-recognized structures. Thus, globally benchmarked English privileges clarity, organization, polishing, and conformity to international rubrics. In Irvine and Gal's (2000) terms, assessment contributes to linguistic differentiation by making certain structured and standardized forms of English institutionally visible while erasing or devaluing alternative ways of expressing meaning.

In coaching centers, legitimate English was even more tightly tied to test scoring. Hasan stated:

We focus on what will get marks. It doesn't matter how they say it, as long as it matches the expected answer. In IELTS, students need to know what kind of response gives a higher band. So, we teach them the safest and most effective way to answer.

This shows the most instrumental version of legitimate English. Meaning, voice, and communicative authenticity are secondary to answer matching and band score maximization. Hasan's phrase "what will get marks" shows how test-score English becomes the dominant language ideology in coaching centers. English is legitimate when it is efficient,

predictable, and aligned with the scoring criteria. Here, legitimacy is not primarily defined by communicative richness, but by the capacity of language to generate measurable outcomes.

Across the three cases, three versions of legitimate English emerged: board-exam English in public schools, globally benchmarked English in private English-medium schools, and test-score English in coaching centers. These forms overlap in their reliance on standardization, but differ in institutional logic. Public schools privilege national examination conformity; private schools privilege internationally recognizable academic English; and coaching centers privilege score-producing English. Clearly, assessment regimes stratify English and reproduce unequal access to valued linguistic capital (Bourdieu, 1991; Kirkpatrick, 2021; Tupas, 2023). Moreover, assessment participates in standard language ideology by treating exam-compatible English as neutral and correct. Meanwhile, creative, oral, localized, or nonstandard practices are positioned as risky, less valuable, or outside the category of legitimate English (Irvine & Gal, 2000; Kroskrity, 2000; Milroy & Milroy, 2012; Lippi-Green, 2012).

Theme 4: Teacher Agency and the Negotiation of Language Practices

Despite strong assessment and market pressure, teachers were not passive policy implementers, demonstrating different forms of agency. However, the scope of agency significantly varied across institutional contexts. Therefore, teacher agency is best understood as situated, relational, and shaped by institutional conditions, resources, assessment demands, and professional beliefs (Biesta, 2015; Priestley et al., 2015).

In public schools, while teachers largely complied with SSC/HSC assessment demands, they also created small, informal spaces for broader language learning. Rahim explained:

Sometimes I give oral feedback or ask students to speak in class, but this is not part of the formal assessment. If we follow only the exam, students don't really learn English, so we try to include some discussion when possible. But I cannot spend too much time on it because the exam syllabus is always there.

This shows micro-resistance. Rahiim does not openly reject the examination system, but creates limited opportunities for speaking and discussion. The phrase "not part of the formal assessment" reveals the marginal status of these practices;e "students don't really learn English" shows critical awareness of exam-driven limitations. His agency appears in the gap between what is officially required and what he believes that students need.

Private English-medium teachers showed more visible pedagogical hybridity. Farhana explained:

We include creative tasks, but we also align them with the exam criteria so that students are prepared. We try to develop students' speaking and critical thinking, but we always connect it back to how it will help in exams. Otherwise, parents and administrators may not see the value of those tasks.

This clearly illustrates hybridity. Farhana combined communicative and creative goals with assessment alignment. The repeated structure, "we include…but," "we try…but", shows the balancing act required in private schools. Her practice does not reject standardized assessment; rather, it extends assessment criteria to include broader learning outcomes. However, even innovation requires institutional justification.

In coaching centers, teacher agency was the most constrained and was primarily expressed through strategic adaptation. Fariza explained:

We cannot go beyond the test. Students expect results, so we focus only on what will come in the exam. Our job is to improve scores. If we do something different, students may not be satisfied. They are paying for a specific outcome,

so we have to deliver that.

This demonstrates how market accountability restricts pedagogical alternatives. Unlike public school teachers, who sometimes undertook informal communicative activities, coaching center teachers described little room for such practices. Fariza's phrase "students expect results" positions learners as consumers and teachers as service providers. Here, agency is not expressed through resistance but through efficient score-oriented instruction.

Hasan reinforced this:

Everything is planned according to the exam. There is no space for extra activities. If a student is weak in reading, we drill reading. If the problem is writing task two, we practice that again and again. We don't have time for anything outside the test.

This captures the test preparation model's near-total dominance. The phrase "no space" contrasts sharply with the "some freedom" and informal micro-resistance described by private and public school teachers, respectively. In coaching centers, the teacher's role is narrowed to performance optimization through targeted remediation.

Overall, teacher agency is institutionally uneven. Public school teachers engaged in micro-resistance through informal practices supporting broader language use. Private English-medium teachers practiced pedagogical hybridity by blending communicative goals with assessment rubrics. Coaching center teachers mainly adapted to market demands through test-focused strategies. These forms of agency mattered because they shaped both assessment practices and the kinds of English students encountered: exam, global academic, or test-score English. Thus, teachers functioned as mediators of language ideology, sometimes reproducing dominant assessment norms and creating limited spaces for alternative language practices (Ball et al., 2012; Menken & García, 2010).

Discussion

This study offers a small-scale, interpretive account of how six ESL/EFL teachers across public schools, private English-medium schools, and private coaching centers in Bangladesh experienced the relationship between assessment regimes, market pressures, teacher agency, and the construction of English. It shows how these teachers narrated assessment pressures within specific institutional conditions. Across cases, high-stakes testing and market-oriented accountability shaped assessment practices, and which forms of English were treated as measurable, useful, and institutionally legitimate.

The findings extend the conventional understanding of washback by showing that assessment operates pedagogically and sociolinguistically. Pedagogically, test formats, model answers, marking schemes, and score expectations shaped classroom activities and assessment decisions. This was evident in public schools, where SSC/HSC formats encouraged patterned written responses, and coaching centers, where IELTS/TOEFL preparation emphasized mock tests, timed drills, and score-oriented strategies. Indeed, high-stakes testing can narrow teaching towards examinable skills and measurable outcomes (Green, 2013; Cheng et al., 2022). Sociolinguistically, assessment also shaped beliefs about what counted as "good," "correct," or "valuable" English, functioning as a mechanism of language regulation legitimizing some forms while marginalizing others (Shohamy, 2001; Fulcher, 2023).

Our key contribution was identifying three locally situated constructions of legitimate English. In public schools, English is constructed as board-exam English: written, patterned, grammar-focused, and aligned with national examination formats. In private English-medium schools, English appeared as globally benchmarked English, shaped by international curricula, institutional reputation, parental investment, and academic mobility. In coaching centers,

English was constructed as test-score English, valued through band scores, mock-test performance, and measurable improvement. These categories are offer analytical interpretations of English practices based on the three. Here, English functions as a stratified form of linguistic capital, whose value changes according to institutional location, assessment demand, and market conditions (Bourdieu, 1991; Tupas, 2023).

Market forces were especially visible in private English-medium schools and coaching centers. In private schools, parental expectations and institutional branding intensified the pressure to demonstrate progress through visible results. Teachers had some pedagogical flexibility, but which remained tied to rubrics, exam outcomes, and school reputation. In coaching centers, English was more explicitly commodified as a purchasable service linked to score improvement. Teachers described students and parents as seeking measurable outcomes, especially IELTS/TOEFL scores, positioning English as a marketable product rather than a communicative resource. This reflects English's political economy, where the language is produced, ranked, and exchanged within institutional markets (Park & Wee, 2012). It also aligns with work on language commodification in late capitalism, where English is tied to parental investment, institutional reputation, mobility, and score production (Heller, 2010; Duchêne & Heller, 2012). Crucially, board-exam English, globally benchmarked English, and test-score English operate as unequal Englishes because they are authorized by different assessments and market regimes (Tupas, 2015).

Teacher agency was central, but uneven across contexts. Public school teachers largely complied with national examination structures, while also describing small acts of micro-resistance. Private English-medium teachers demonstrated pedagogical hybridity by embedding creative and communicative tasks within rubric-based or exam-oriented frameworks. Coaching center teachers mainly described strategic adaptation to market demands through mock tests, diagnostic drills, and score-focused remediation. Thus, teacher agency is not unrestricted professional choice but is situated, relational, and shaped by institutional structures, assessment expectations, resources, and market pressures (Biesta, 2015; Priestley et al., 2015).

Overall, assessment regimes and market forces shape classroom practices and the forms of English which become institutionally valued. This has implications for Asian sociolinguistic debates on English diversification, suggesting that diversification should be examined alongside standardization, commodification, stratification, and institutional control (Kirkpatrick, 2021; Fang & Widodo, 2019; Tupas, 2023).

Conclusion

Contributing to critical sociolinguistic debates, this study shows how English is produced as a stratified linguistic resource within institutional markets, authorizing some Englishes while marginalizing others (Heller, 2010; Park & Wee, 2012; Tupas, 2015).

This study has several policy and practical implications. Assessment authorities should reconsider the dominance of narrow, high-stakes testing and develop more balanced frameworks encompassing summative and formative purposes. Public schools can create formal spaces for speaking, interaction, and communicative language use within existing examination structures. Assessment reform should consider that tests also define which language practices are valued and rewarded (Shohamy, 2001; Cheng et al., 2022). A more equitable assessment policy should value communicative competence, locally meaningful English use, and multilingual awareness (Kirkpatrick, 2021).

Private English-medium school leaders should balance international benchmarking with broader pedagogical goals by supporting assessment practices valuing creativity, critical thinking, communication, and learner agency alongside exam preparation. Coaching centers require particular attention, recognizing the pedagogical risks of treating band

score improvement as the sole indicator of English development, especially in highly marketized settings (Barnawi et al., 2023; Tupas, 2023).

For teacher education, assessment literacy and critical language awareness should be strengthened. It should help them design valid, formative, communicative, and context-sensitive assessments while navigating institutional constraints. Such developments should also address the language ideologies embedded in rubrics, model answers, marking schemes, and score-based accountability. Supporting teachers as active mediators of language practice is essential for expanding pedagogical agency (Biesta, 2015; Priestley et al., 2015).

The study also has limitations. The sample only comprised six teachers across three institutional contexts. It primarily relied on semi-structured interviews, providing rich accounts of teachers' experiences but did not directly capture classroom interactions, assessment events, or student responses. Documents were used only for contextual support. Further, it did not include sustained classroom observations, administrator interviews, and parental or student perspectives. Therefore, the findings offer an interpretive account of selected teachers' experiences than a comprehensive account of English assessments in Bangladesh (Patton, 2015).

Scholars can build on this study using ethnographic, longitudinal, and classroom-based designs. Classroom observations can examine how teachers' reported practices correspond to actual assessment events and classroom language use. Longitudinal research can trace how examination reforms, institutional policies, and market pressures reshape assessment over time. Comparative studies across regions of Bangladesh, and other South Asian or Asian contexts can explore whether similar patterns of different forms of English. More diverse stakeholders can be considered to develop a fuller picture of how English is assessed, valued, and legitimized across the wider educational ecology.

Abbreviations

Abbreviation	Meaning
EFL	English as a Foreign Language
ESL	English as a Second Language
ESL/EFL	English as a Second Language/English as a Foreign Language
HSC	Higher Secondary Certificate
IELTS	International English Language Testing System
O/A Level	Ordinary/Advanced Level
SSC	Secondary School Certificate
TOEFL	Test of English as a Foreign Language

Declarations

Author Contribution

Md Zahangir Alam-Introduction, Methodology, Data Analysis, Discussion, Impact of the study, Conclusion, Literature Review

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