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Conscientization under Constraint: Employment Relations and Critical Language-Policy Agency in Bangladeshi Private Universities

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Research Article

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Abstract

Critical language policy (CLP) research has documented how teachers interpret, appropriate, and contest institutional language policy, and recent work has begun specifying the conditions under which transformative agency is mobilised. Largely unexamined is how employment relations condition two linked steps: whether teachers can build a structural reading of policy, and whether any such reading can be publicly expressed and collectively organised. I address that gap through a cross-sectional study of fourteen English-language teachers at seven Bangladeshi private universities, drawing on adapted biographical-narrative interviews, reflective journals, critical-incident narratives, and critical discourse analysis of institutional artefacts. Freire's critical consciousness describes interpretive discourse; Archer's morphogenetic approach orders retrospectively narrated sequences. Three recurrent configurations emerge, in which employment relation, educational biography, site, seniority, and scholarly access are entangled. Sustained structural-ideological interpretation appeared only among permanently employed Bangla-medium teachers with eight or more years' experience and access to collegial scholarly space; incipient structural questioning was widespread among contractually employed Bangla-medium and madrasa-formed teachers but was withheld from public expression; and the single participant-reported instance of codified policy change followed collective organisation rather than individual critique. The article proposes the conscientized-but-constrained position, a structural reading whose institutional expression is foreclosed, as a new analytic category.

Introduction

Critical language policy (CLP) research established long ago that teachers are not the last link in an implementation chain: they interpret institutional mandates, appropriate them selectively, and occasionally reauthorise them (Hornberger & Johnson, 2007; Johnson, 2013; Menken & García, 2010; Tollefson & Pérez-Milans, 2018). A more recent strand asks under what conditions critical engagement becomes possible at all, naming social positioning, resource access, scaffolding, accompaniment, and collective participation (Goirigolzarri-Garaizar & Alonso, 2025; Grad & Tudela-Isanta, 2025). Amorrortu et al. (2025) theorise "spaces of conscientization" bridging experienced inequality and its contestation; Otxotorena-Aranguren and Martín Rojo (2025) trace how critical awareness is assembled interactionally.

This literature has largely been built where the enabling conditions were supplied by the research itself. Participatory designs convene the reading groups, protect the deliberative time, and furnish the vocabulary whose absence they then identify as a constraint. But it leaves a question unasked: where no researcher convenes anything, how are those conditions distributed, and by what? This article proposes that in marketised private higher education they are distributed substantially by employment relation, which bears on two points: whether teachers can build a structural reading of policy at all and, more visibly, whether any such reading can be said aloud, shared, and organised. Neupane and Rana (2026) have shown how English-medium mandates generate career injustice and a split between performative compliance and substantive resistance in a comparable South Asian system; they do not, however,

separate forming a critique from voicing it, or ask who can sign a collective proposal. That step, expressibility, is the concern here.

Three gaps follow, and the study is designed around them. The first is conceptual. Critical consciousness research has been faulted for attending to reflection at the expense of action (Diemer et al., 2021; Jemal, 2017), and language-policy scholarship has called for a fuller account of how structure mediates agency (Bouchard & Glasgow, 2019; Liddicoat & Taylor-Leech, 2021). Neither theorises the intermediate moment at which a critique, incipient or fully formed, is voiced or withheld. Organisational research treats that moment as voice versus silence, shaped by perceived risk and power (Hirschman, 1970; Morrison, 2014), a link not yet carried into language-policy agency. The second is contextual. Bangladeshi research on English in private higher education has mapped medium-of-instruction ideologies, institutional hierarchies, and neoliberal branding (Hamid et al., 2013; Karim et al., 2023; Rahman & Hu, 2025), but treats teachers as holders of ideology or implementers of practice, seldom as employees whose contract terms govern what they can say; research on precarious language-teaching work documents insecurity and attrition without asking what precarity does to policy critique (Breshears, 2019; Daddow et al., 2024). The third is methodological: studied conditions have been researcher-convened, and no procedure separates spontaneous from elicited framing.

The design is cross-sectional, so it cannot observe critical consciousness developing or any teacher moving between interpretive positions; it can examine how differently positioned teachers articulate the institutional English-only policy and what conditions they identify as governing expression. Two research questions follow:

RQ1: How do English-language teachers in Bangladeshi private universities articulate the institutional English-only policy, and how do these articulations pattern across configurations of employment relation, educational biography, institutional site, and access to scholarly community?

RQ2: Under what conditions, as narrated by participants and evidenced in their accounts of policy episodes, does structural critique of the policy become publicly expressible, collectively organised, and consequential for institutional policy texts?

The contribution is deliberately narrow but new in three respects, each answering one gap. Empirically, and addressing the contextual gap, employment relations appear to shape both access to the resources from which structural readings are built and whether such readings can be voiced and collectively organised, while structural interpretation alone does not produce policy change; as far as I can establish, no study of language-policy agency has treated the employment contract as a condition bearing on the expressibility of critique. Conceptually, the article separates five processes that existing accounts tend to collapse (interpreting policy structurally, saying so, circulating that reading, organising collectively, and changing a policy text) and names the gap between the first two the conscientized-but-constrained position. Methodologically, it studies unconvened conditions through a two-subsession procedure contrasting spontaneous with elicited framing and a configurational reading that treats entangled structural attributes as a finding rather than a confound.

Context: English, Private Higher Education, and the Terms of Academic Employment

Bangladesh's relationship with English carries its postcolonial history in condensed form. The Language Movement of 1952 made Bengali the foundation of national identity, while an inherited colonial architecture still positions English as the language of administration and professional distinction (Hamid, 2010; Phillipson, 1992): colonial residue, aspirational resource, and market-certified credential at once. In this ambivalent environment private-university language policies operate, and teachers negotiate professional identity (Author, 2016; Karim et al., 2023; Rahman & Hu, 2025).

Deregulation under the Private University Act of 1992, later replaced by the Act of 2010, transformed the sector. Private universities, now exceeding one hundred, absorb students unable to secure public-university places (Chowdhury & Kabir, 2014; Hamid et al., 2025a); tuition-dependent, they compete on employability and English-medium provision read through a human-capital logic (Block et al., 2012; Harvey, 2005). English-medium instruction functions less as pedagogy than as branding (Piller & Cho, 2013; Rahman & Hu, 2025).

What distinguishes the sector here is the structure of academic employment. Much teaching is delivered on fixed-term contracts renewed annually or per semester by departmental heads whose discretion is wide rather than procedurally safeguarded; evaluation proceeds through student-satisfaction instruments in which English fluency figures prominently, and compliance is monitored informally (Rahman & Hu, 2025). Educational biography stratifies the workforce further: prestige attaches to teachers formed in English-medium schooling (Author, 2023a), while colleagues from Bangla-medium or madrasa institutions enter at a disadvantage that begins in the admission architecture Roshid et al. (2023) document.

Writing on Indigenous-language endangerment, Ahmed (2025) reads Bangladeshi language education policies as distraction mechanisms displacing attention from structural inequity; an English-only norm framed as quality assurance works similarly. These teachers must enact arrangements reproducing the inequality through which they were formed, and the cost of saying so is borne unequally.

Framework

Critical language policy and the conditions of critical agency

The CLP tradition established that language policies are ideological formations reproducing social hierarchies while performing administrative neutrality (Pennycook, 2001, 2021; Phillipson, 1992; Spolsky, 2004; Tollefson, 1991). Shohamy (2006) identified the hidden mechanisms (testing regimes, evaluation rubrics, curriculum mandates) through which policies exercise force without appearing coercive. Later work showed teachers interpreting, appropriating, and reauthorising policy within ideological and implementational spaces (Hornberger & Johnson, 2007; Johnson, 2013; Menken & García, 2010), the local being a site of negotiation (Canagarajah, 2005). Bangladesh scholarship traces how neoliberal

restructuring commodifies English proficiency (Hamid et al., 2025a; Rahman & Hu, 2025). What this tradition established is that teachers make policy; what it has rarely asked is who among them can afford to say so.

The most pertinent recent development is the specification of enabling conditions for transformative agency (Goirigolzarri-Garaizar & Alonso, 2025; Grad & Tudela-Isanta, 2025). Its conditions are convened rather than found: the instruments and interactional analyses operate within spaces researchers established (Otxotorena-Aranguren & Martín Rojo, 2025), mostly in public-sector or civil-society settings where employment security is not the main axis of differentiation. Where enabling conditions are neither convened nor evenly available, the question becomes distributive, and here that mechanism is contractual. Teacher-agency research shares the blind spot. Ecological accounts locate agency in the interplay of biography, structure, and resources (Priestley et al., 2015; Tao & Gao, 2021), and recent reviews confirm that context mediates language teachers' identity, emotion, and agency (Kang, 2025; Truong et al., 2025), yet employment status figures there as one contextual factor among many rather than as the relation deciding whether a critique can leave the classroom. Bangladeshi applied linguistics, recently urged to set locally grounded research agendas (Hamid et al., 2025b), has not yet taken up that question.

Because English-medium instruction (EMI) conventionally denotes teaching content through English and the participants teach language courses, "institutional English-only policy" is the primary analytic term, with "EMI" reserved for sector-wide discourse.

Freire and Archer: an asymmetrical and qualified pairing

Two theories organise the analysis. Freire's conscientização (1970, 1973) describes movement from unreflective acceptance of social conditions toward understanding them as humanly made and alterable through praxis. Three positions structure that account: semi-intransitive consciousness, absorbed in immediate necessity, naturalises dominant arrangements; naïve transitivity registers dissonance and poses questions without locating its source; critical transitivity connects personal experience, institutional arrangement, and ideological power. Archer's morphogenetic approach (1995, 2003, 2007), grounded in critical realism (Bhaskar, 1998), theorises the temporal conditions under which structures are reproduced or transformed: structural conditioning (T1), socio-cultural interaction (T2–T3), and structural elaboration or reproduction (T4).

The tension between them is real. Freire's conscientization is not an internal event open to inspection in an interview but is inseparable from dialogic praxis, consciousness and world being co-constituted in action; Archer's analytical dualism holds structure and agency apart, with distinct properties over distinct temporal intervals.

The pairing adopted here is therefore asymmetrical and bounded. Freire's typology is used descriptively, to characterise the interpretive work visible in recorded talk, not to diagnose a person's consciousness (Section 4.4 renames the categories accordingly). Archer's cycle orders the retrospective sequences

participants narrate; no morphogenetic cycle is claimed to have been observed. Freire's "limit situations," which constrain without determining and become visible only when named, are a phenomenological counterpart to structural conditioning. "Conscientization" and "conscientized" are thus heuristic labels for an analytic territory, not attributions of consciousness.

One distinction, extended from Archer, does substantive work. Five processes are kept separate: structural interpretation of policy; its expression to colleagues, superiors, or policy forums; circulation of discursive resources; formation of organised collective actors; and change in a policy text. Archer's scheme names the first and the last three. The second, whether an individual framing can be voiced at all, it leaves implicit; organisational research frames it as the choice between voice and silence, with exit as the residual option (Hirschman, 1970; Morrison, 2014). Archer (1995) distinguishes primary agents, who lack the resources to influence structural arrangements, from corporate agents, organised and capable of articulating shared interests. Permanent employment does not confer corporate agency; at most it removes an obstacle.

Sensitising resources and the analytic model

Two further bodies of work serve as sensitising resources. Feminist standpoint theory (Harding, 1986) supplies a conditional expectation: structurally marginalised subjects may have sharper access to the contradictions of dominant arrangements, but only where material conditions permit. Hence the defeasible anticipation that Bangla-medium-formed teachers may articulate an English-only norm differently from colleagues for whom it is unremarkable. Postcolonial and Southern-epistemological scholarship (Kubota, 2020; Kumaravadivelu, 2016; Motha, 2014; Shah, 2025) informs how the ideological freight of English is read, while work on Bangladeshi teachers negotiating authority under pedagogical mandates (Author, 2015a) and language teacher identity scholarship (Author, 2025b; Morgan, 2004; Norton, 2000; Varghese et al., 2005) supply the account of situated professional action the argument engages.

Table 1 sets out the resulting six-dimensional heuristic, each dimension associated with a phase of the morphogenetic cycle and, where relevant, an interpretive-performance category (Section 4.4). The dimensions are anchors on a continuum, not stages, and no movement between them is claimed.

Table 1

The Conscientization-under-Constraint Heuristic

Dimension	Description	Primary anchors
1. Structural conditioning	English-only norms, employment precarity, informal monitoring, and evaluation instruments distribute linguistic capital unequally, setting the conditions for interpretation and action (Archer's T1).	Archer (1995); Shohamy (2006); Phillipson (1992)
2. Positional reflexivity	Teachers notice the biographical-institutional gap and register it as dissonance requiring explanation: incipient structural questioning in recorded talk; in narrated sequence, entry into T2.	Archer (2003); Freire (1973); Harding (1986)
3. Structural-ideological interpretation	Where conceptual resources are accessible (scholarly networks, critical-pedagogy communities, collegial solidarity), the policy is articulated as ideological and contestable, whether or not the teacher endorses it (T2–T3 as narrated).	Freire (1970); Pennycook (2021); Amorrortu et al. (2025)
4. Expressibility	An incipient or sustained structural reading is voiced to colleagues, superiors, or policy forums, confined to students, enacted covertly, or withheld; contract renewal, informal monitoring, and access to deliberative spaces set the threshold (between T2 and T3 as narrated).	Hirschman (1970); Morrison (2014); Archer (1995)
5. Agentive negotiation	Policy is negotiated through proactive redesign, reactive adaptation, or covert practice, including translanguaging; the available form is conditioned by institutional position and employment security (T2–T3 outcome).	Priestley et al. (2015); Benson (2007); Menken & García (2010)
6. Morphogenetic possibility	Where corporate agents with sufficient institutional capital organise collectively, change to a policy text becomes possible (T4 elaboration); where precarity suppresses organisation, arrangements are reproduced (morphostasis).	Archer (1995, 2007); Adam-Bagley & Abubaker (2023)

Methodology

Design and epistemological position

The study is grounded in critical realism (Bhaskar, 1998), which supports retroductive inference from observed patterns to the structural conditions that would render them intelligible, treated as tendencies rather than laws. A critical qualitative design combined biographical-narrative interviewing adapted from the Biographical-Narrative Interpretive Method (BNIM; Wengraf, 2001), reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022), and critical discourse analysis (CDA; Fairclough, 1992, 2001) of institutional documents.

Sites, participants, and the entanglement of structural attributes

Fourteen English-language teachers at seven private universities were recruited through purposive maximum-variation sampling (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) across market position, English-only stringency, and

contract pattern (Tables 2 and 3). Sample adequacy was judged by information power (Malterud et al., 2016).

All three permanent English-medium participants (Farhan, Jahan, Rashid) are at a single elite-aspirant site, UNI-A, so institutional culture cannot be separated from educational biography. Contractual participants have two to five years' experience against eight to sixteen for permanent participants; and reading-group access, rank, contract type, and site overlap. Findings are therefore reported as configurations, not as effects of single attributes.

Table 2
Institutional Profiles of Participating Universities (N = 7)

Site	Location	Market position	English-only stringency	Participants
UNI-A	Urban	Elite-aspirant	High; formal monitoring	Farhan, Jahan, Rashid
UNI-B	Urban	Established mid-tier	Moderate-high	Layla, Omar
UNI-C	Peri-urban	Growth-oriented	High; aspirational	Hasina, Nilufar
UNI-D	Rural-adjacent	Developing	High; market-driven	Arif, Sultana
UNI-E	Urban	Technical focus	High; discipline-wide	Mohin
UNI-F	Peri-urban	Mid-tier	Moderate	Imran, Parveen
UNI-G	Rural-adjacent	Newer institution	High; identity-building	Karim, Dilruba

Note. "English-only stringency" denotes the de facto institutional policy, not a statutory mandate (Section 4.3). Market-position descriptors are the author's classifications from public institutional profiles and participant accounts.

Table 3

Participant Profiles (N = 14)

Pseudonym	Gender	Educ. background	Region of origin	Contract	Role	Yrs.
Arif	M	Bangla-medium	Rural	Contractual	Lecturer	4
Dilruba	F	Bangla-medium	Rural	Contractual	Writing Instructor	3
Farhan	M	English-medium	Urban	Permanent	Senior Lecturer	11
Hasina	F	Bangla-medium	Peri-urban	Permanent	Associate Prof.	14
Imran	M	Bangla-medium	Rural	Contractual	Lecturer	2
Jahan	F	English-medium	Urban	Permanent	Course Coordinator	9
Karim	M	Madrasa-affiliated	Rural	Contractual	Lecturer	5
Layla	F	Bangla-medium	Urban	Permanent	Senior Lecturer	12
Mohin	M	English-medium	Urban	Contractual	Writing Instructor	3
Nilufar	F	Bangla-medium	Rural	Contractual	Lecturer	2
Omar	M	Bangla-medium	Peri-urban	Permanent	Programme Coord.	10
Parveen	F	Bangla-medium	Rural	Permanent	Lecturer	8
Rashid	M	English-medium	Urban	Permanent	Head of Dept.	16
Sultana	F	Bangla-medium	Rural	Contractual	Writing Instructor	3

Note. All participants taught English-language, academic-writing, or related language-skills courses rather than content subjects. Course titles are suppressed to limit deductive disclosure risk. Region denotes region of origin, not site location (Table 2).

Class was not measured through a standardised schedule; details on parental education, occupation, and mobility arose unevenly, no participant was assigned a class category on medium or origin alone, and class claims are confined to mechanisms participants described.

Data collection: an adaptation of BNIM

Subsession 1 opened with a single question aimed at inducing narrative (SQAIN): "Please tell me the story of your professional life as a teacher of English, beginning wherever you wish," followed by minimal, non-directive facilitation. Where BNIM proper returns to topics raised in the first subsession, Subsession 2

introduced a predetermined stimulus: participants were presented with, or asked to describe, their institution's English-only policy statement, the student-evaluation instrument used in their unit, and applicable regulatory guidance, with the prompt "What does this document mean to you as a teacher?"

Policy statements and evaluation instruments were obtainable at four of the seven sites; elsewhere, participants described from recollection or personal copies the documents they routinely encountered. Only documents from those four sites entered the CDA corpus, and Section 5.1's textual claims rest on them alone.

Interviews were conducted in Bangla, English, or translanguaged talk according to participant preference, audio-recorded, and transcribed verbatim. Published extracts were translated by the author and back-translated by a bilingual colleague; quotations were edited only to remove fillers and identifying details. Reflective journals recorded episodes in which English-only expectations shaped teaching decisions, interactions, or emotions (twelve participants contributed); critical-incident narratives were elicited from all fourteen.

No case-complete timing or fieldwork-calendar metadata were retained, and none is reconstructed. Classifications and quoted extracts rest principally on the interview corpus, with journals and critical incidents used for contextualisation and triangulation.

Because a life-history prompt does not ask about policy, absent structural reflection in Subsession 1 cannot indicate a level of consciousness; the contrast shows only how far the artefact and an invitation to critique shift framing.

Table 4

Institutional-Document Corpus

Document (type & title)	Issuing body	Date / status	Site(s)	Language	Access	Analytical use
Institutional English-only policy statements and circulars (titles anonymised)	Participating universities	Current at data collection; exact dates withheld	4 of 7 obtained; 3 not obtained	English	Restricted institutional copies	CDA of modality, exclusivity, legitimation, discourse practice, and social practice
Student-evaluation instruments (titles anonymised)	Participating universities	Current at data collection; exact dates withheld	4 of 7 obtained; 3 not obtained	English	Restricted institutional copies	CDA of 14-item instruments, including 3–5 fluency and pronunciation items
Private University Act, 2010 (Act No. 35 of 2010; 18 July 2010)	Bangladesh Parliament / Ministry of Law, Justice and Parliamentary Affairs	2010; current during analysis	Sector-wide	Bangla	Public official text	Contextual; checked for any medium-of-instruction provision
National Education Policy 2010, Higher Education, Strategies 9 and 11 (p. 32)	Ministry of Education, Government of Bangladesh	2010; current during analysis	Sector-wide	Bangla; published English version consulted	Public policy text	Contextual; English alongside Bangla, not an English-only mandate

Note. Site-to-document links, dates, and item locations are retained in the audit trail but suppressed to limit deductive disclosure. No instrument in the corpus imposed an English-only medium-of-instruction requirement.

The Private University Act 2010 (full Bangla text; Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh, 2010) contains no medium-of-instruction provision, while the National Education Policy 2010 states in Higher Education Strategy 11 that English will remain a medium of instruction alongside Bangla (Ministry of Education, 2010, p. 32; see also Karim et al., 2023). English-only is therefore a de facto institutional policy, the macroisation of convergent micro-level decisions (Hamid & Erling, 2016), legitimated by rather than mandated through state regulation.

Analysis and the classification of interpretive performance

Four procedures were integrated. BNIM's Structural Analysis of the Told Story (SATS; Wengraf, 2001) segmented transcripts by modality change and constructed Lived Life and Told Story panels. Reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022) mapped how power shaped discursive constructions across journals and critical incidents. Fairclough's (1992, 2001) three-dimensional CDA examined the artefacts at textual, discourse-practice, and social-practice levels, and morphogenetic mapping (Adam-Bagley & Abubaker, 2023; Archer, 1995) ordered each case's narrated sequence of conditions, action, and outcome.

Assigning teachers to levels of consciousness would reproduce the hierarchy this article criticises. The categories therefore describe recorded interpretive performance, not persons: policy-naturalising interpretation, incipient structural questioning, and sustained structural-ideological interpretation (indicators at Table 5). The criterion is structural reasoning, not agreement with the analyst: structural reasoning that endorses the policy counts; disapproval without structural analysis does not. Arif, Dilruba, and Sultana sit close to a boundary, as Table 6 flags.

Outcome categories in Table 6 are defined observably. Morphostasis records no reported alteration in any policy text, evaluation instrument, or codified departmental practice attributable to the participant. Partial change records a localised, uncodified accommodation within the participant's own teaching or unit. Discursive change records a shift in the interpretive resources circulating among students or colleagues without alteration to rules. Policy morphogenesis records a codified change to a policy text. Expression was coded from accounts of episodes as voiced (stated to colleagues, superiors, or policy forums), student-facing, covert (enacted, not stated), or withheld (a reported decision not to state it). Qualifiers mark morphostasis reinforced by the participant's compliance (reinforcing) or accompanying covert practice (strategic), and discursive change confined to students (limited).

Negative-case analysis was consequential. The Hasina–Nilufar same-site pair displaced an initial biography-alone reading, since a shared Bangla-medium background did not produce a common interpretive performance; contract, seniority, and resource access were retained as co-present conditions. Parveen's case required separating institutional constraint from precarity. A bilingual applied-linguistics colleague reviewed all borderline cases during peer debriefing.

Table 5

Indicators for Classifying Interpretive Performance in the Recorded Data

Interpretive performance	Subsession 1 (spontaneous narrative) indicators	Subsession 2 (elicited artefact) indicators
Policy-naturalising interpretation	Policy absent from the narrative; professional life narrated as routine; no structural or ideological framing.	Policy texts treated as reasonable or necessary; procedural response; no structural analysis.
Incipient structural questioning	Policy registered as a burden framed as personal inadequacy, or questioned (e.g. who designed this instrument) without a mechanism.	Registers discomfort but attributes it to personal limitation, or interrogates the instrument without naming a mechanism.
Sustained structural-ideological interpretation	Sustained critique connecting personal experience to institutional design and to ideology or class in structural vocabulary, whether or not the teacher endorses the policy.	Names a mechanism (e.g. class filter, colonial logic, power operation) rather than the practical content alone; endorsement or rejection is not the criterion.

Note. Categories describe interpretation evidenced in recorded talk under specified prompting conditions, not a property of the participant.

Trustworthiness, ethics, and reflexivity

Trustworthiness followed Lincoln and Guba's (1985) criteria, informed by recent guidance on operationalising qualitative rigour in applied linguistics (Author, 2025a). Transcripts were returned to all fourteen participants for correction, addition, or withdrawal before analysis. Case-level summaries were also circulated where documented, but since completion for every participant cannot be established, this is treated as an analytic audit rather than member checking. Triangulation, peer debriefing, an audit trail, thick description, and negative-case analysis supported the other criteria.

Because the argument is that structural position conditions what can be said about policy, the author's own position is treated as an analytic resource. A Bangla-medium background, a comparable class trajectory, and prior teaching in this sector afforded rapport, while risking reading structural critique into accounts that did not articulate it. SATS anchoring, the Table 5 indicators, peer review of boundary cases, and the audit trail checked that risk.

Ethical approval

was obtained from the author's institutional review board before recruitment, and participants gave written informed consent with guaranteed withdrawal rights. Given employment precarity, composite identifiers and encrypted storage were used, and each participant reviewed their identifier before publication. To limit deductive disclosure, site descriptors were kept coarse, titles suppressed, dates and role labels generalised, and quotations screened for identifying detail.

Findings

Findings are organised around the three configurations that recur across the sample and are consolidated in Table 6. Sections 5.2–5.4 answer RQ1; expression and outcome evidence (5.3–5.5) answers RQ2.

What the artefacts do

The institutional architecture operates through what Shohamy (2006) theorises as hidden policy: evaluation instruments in which fluency figures as a quality criterion, informal hierarchies calibrated to English-medium biographies, and, in participants' accounts, the bearing of evaluation on contract renewal. In the four obtained instruments, three to five of fourteen items addressed English fluency and pronunciation exclusively ("the teacher communicates clearly and fluently in English"), while none addressed pedagogical design, critical questioning, or multilingual effectiveness. Textually, they construct fluency as a primary index of teacher quality; as discourse practice, they distribute a scoring resource unevenly across a heterogeneously formed workforce.

Privileging fluency does not of itself demonstrate the reproduction of class stratification; that would require linking wording to scores, scores to employment consequences, and consequences to biographical groups, and scores and renewal decisions were inaccessible. The defensible claim is narrower: the instruments privilege a resource unequally distributed by educational biography, and participants understood their scores to bear on renewal.

The policy statements operate comparably. Formulations such as "all academic activities shall be conducted in English" combine an imperative with an exclusive, constructing compliance as non-negotiable and multilingual alternatives as impermissible; nominalisations such as "international standards" abstract away the social relations producing those standards.

Configuration A: naturalising interpretation

English-medium educational biography, urban formation, and, in three of four cases, permanent employment at UNI-A compose the first configuration. Farhan, Jahan, and Rashid narrated professional lives in which the policy did not appear as a policy. Asked in Subsession 2 about the evaluation instrument, Jahan and Rashid read it as "a reasonable measure of communication skill." Rashid, the most senior participant, extended that reading: "if graduates are going to compete globally, they need English … it is practical reality." Mohin, contractual and elsewhere but English-medium-formed, produced the same pattern: "I have never really thought of it as a policy … it is just the natural context."

Mohin breaks the correspondence between contract type and interpretive performance: biographical alignment with rewarded linguistic capital appears sufficient for naturalising interpretation regardless of contract.

Configuration B: incipient structural questioning without public expression

Bangla-medium or madrasa formation, rural origin, contractual employment, junior rank, and no access to collegial scholarly space compose the second configuration. Six participants fall here, and their accounts share a common structure: dissonance is registered, its institutional location approached, its expression described as unaffordable.

Arif's paired subsessions illustrate the pattern most fully. Narrating his professional life in Subsession 1 without any prompt about policy, he located difficulty in "performing English rather than teaching through it." Presented in Subsession 2 with his institution's evaluation instrument, he connected that experience to its consequences:

I always feel like I am performing English rather than teaching through it. But I cannot say this openly. If the department chair thinks I am resistant to policy, my contract will simply not be renewed. So I smile and I comply. (Arif, contractual, Bangla-medium, rural)

Arif supplies an account of conditions governing articulability rather than an ideological analysis: the mechanism he names is contract renewal. Karim, from a madrasa background, described more starkly the absence of the capital the field rewards: "In my entire schooling, everything was in Arabic or Bangla. Now I am supposed to grade essays in English and be evaluated for how fluently I speak it. Where was the preparation? … You suffer quietly or you leave." Dilruba and Sultana each moved, within Subsession 2, from evaluation experienced as personal failure toward interrogation of the instrument: "whether the form itself was designed to penalise teachers like me" (Dilruba); "what exactly are they evaluating? And who designed this?" (Sultana). Both reach toward institutional design without naming a mechanism. Nilufar registered dissonance without locating it at all: "I feel things are wrong but I cannot explain why."

Imran stated the exclusion mechanism directly: "I wanted to join the reading group. But I have two months left on my contract … Maybe when I have a permanent position I will have the freedom to ask these questions out loud." The resource at issue is temporal and relational, and contractually distributed.

No second paired extract survives in the audit materials; Dilruba's related evidence comes from a critical-incident narrative and is labelled as such:

The first time a student marked me down for my pronunciation, I thought the problem was my English. Later I began to wonder whether the form itself was designed to penalise teachers like me—but I had no words for this then, and I still could not say it to anyone. (Dilruba, contractual, Bangla-medium, rural)

The cross-case claim rests on Arif's paired extract together with these separately sourced accounts.

Configuration C: sustained structural-ideological interpretation and its outcomes

The third configuration combines Bangla-medium formation, permanent employment, eight or more years' experience, location outside UNI-A, and access to a reading group (Hasina, Omar) or comparable collegial scholarly community (Layla, Parveen). Hasina, Layla, Omar, and Parveen produced the sample's only sustained structural-ideological readings. Presented in Subsession 2 with her own institution's instrument (Section 4.3), whose fluency items parallel those Jahan and Rashid read as reasonable, Hasina read it as an artefact of stratification: "it is measuring how closely a teacher resembles someone who went to an English-medium school. That is a class filter, not a quality instrument."

The Hasina–Nilufar pair is the one contrast that partially isolates a factor. Both are at UNI-C and were formed in Bangla-medium schooling; they differ on contract type, seniority, reading-group access, and region of origin, and only Hasina produces sustained structural interpretation. Holding site constant, the contrast points toward the bundle of employment security, seniority, and resource access, though not to which element does the work.

Parveen described covert practice: "I use Bangla to explain complex structures, even when I am not supposed to. I do not announce it. It is my small rebellion." Her translanguaging against an English-only norm, a policy–practice tension documented elsewhere in Asian higher education (Rahman et al., 2025), produced no reported change: morphostasis, despite sustained critique and permanent employment. Layla described student-facing negotiation whose effects circulated beyond her classroom ("they were bringing these questions to their other classes … a change in how students read the institution"), recorded as discursive change. Hasina reported, only in summary, a localised and uncodified accommodation within her unit, recorded as partial change. Only Omar reported codified change:

After I joined a faculty reading group on language ideology, I had words for what I had experienced for years. Four of us—all with permanent positions—wrote a proposal allowing bilingual drafts in writing courses. After three years it became departmental policy. But the contractual staff who supported us informally could not risk signing. (Omar, permanent, Bangla-medium)

The reported change rests on Omar's retrospective account alone: no departmental document evidencing it was obtained, no second participant corroborated it, and the policy corpus does not contain it.

The account nonetheless bears on the argument: every signatory was permanently employed, and the three-year interval is consistent with the sustained organisation Archer (1995) associates with corporate agency.

Table 6

Cross-Case Matrix: Configuration, Interpretive Performance, Expression and Agency Form, and Reported Outcome (N = 14)

Participant	Config.	Structural position and site	Interpretive performance	Expression and agency form (Dims. 4–5)	Reported outcome
Arif	B	BM, rural, contractual, junior; UNI-D	Incipient structural questioning (boundary)	Covert; expression withheld	Morphostasis
Dilruba	B	BM, rural, contractual, junior, female; UNI-G	Incipient structural questioning (boundary)	None visible; expression withheld	Morphostasis
Farhan	A	EM, urban, permanent; UNI-A	Policy-naturalising	Compliance	Morphostasis (reinforcing)
Hasina	C	BM, peri-urban, permanent, senior, reading group; UNI-C	Sustained structural-ideological	Reactive + proactive	Partial change
Imran	B	BM, rural, contractual, junior; UNI-F	Incipient structural questioning (early)	Compliance; expression withheld; aspiring covert	Morphostasis
Jahan	A	EM, urban, permanent, female; UNI-A	Policy-naturalising	Compliance	Morphostasis (reinforcing)
Karim	B	Madrasa, rural, contractual, junior; UNI-G	Incipient structural questioning (early)	None; expression withheld	Morphostasis
Layla	C	BM, urban, permanent, senior, scholarly community, female; UNI-B	Sustained structural-ideological	Reactive (student-facing)	Discursive change (limited)
Mohin	A	EM, urban, contractual, junior; UNI-E	Policy-naturalising	Compliance	Morphostasis
Nilufar	B	BM, rural, contractual, junior, female; UNI-C	Policy-naturalising / incipient boundary	Expression withheld	Morphostasis
Omar	C	BM, peri-urban, permanent,	Sustained structural-ideological	Voiced; proactive + collective	Policy morphogenesis (participant-

Participant	Config.	Structural position and site	Interpretive performance	Expression and agency form (Dims. 4–5)	Reported outcome
		senior, reading group; UNI-B			reported; uncorroborated)
Parveen	C	BM, rural, permanent, junior rank, scholarly community, female; UNI-F	Sustained structural-ideological	Covert	Morphostasis (strategic)
Rashid	A	EM, urban, permanent, most senior; UNI-A	Policy-naturalising	Compliance	Morphostasis (reinforcing)
Sultana	B	BM, rural, contractual, junior, female; UNI-D	Incipient structural questioning (boundary)	None visible; expression withheld	Morphostasis

Note. BM = Bangla-medium; EM = English-medium. Rows record interpretation evidenced in recorded talk, not a property of the participant. Scholarly community = collegial space other than a reading group; expression coded where accounts specify it; qualifiers as in Section 4.4.

Discordant cases and what the configurations cannot show

Three cases limit this reading.

Rashid unsettles any account resting on seniority. The most senior participant, a department head of sixteen years, produced the least structural reading. What he shares with Farhan and Jahan is educational biography, and that attribute, not seniority, distinguishes them from Configuration C teachers who match them on employment security.

Mohin unsettles the converse account. Precariously placed, he produced no structural questioning: precarity alone does not generate Configuration B's dissonance, which the relation between formation and institutional norm appears to produce.

Parveen unsettles the outcome story. Permanently employed and structurally articulate, she reports morphostasis; her constraint is institutional (an English-only norm and limited access to policy deliberation) rather than contractual. Employment security removes an obstacle to organisation without supplying it.

The configurations are therefore not reducible to any single attribute; the bundles themselves are the objects for further inquiry.

Discussion

Three arguments follow, each bounded by what a cross-sectional design can carry; the second answers RQ1, the first and third RQ2.

The first concerns where employment relation operates, and the answer is at two points. Contractual employment co-occurs with restricted access to the conditions (collegial scholarly space, protected time, security for intellectual risk; Daddow et al., 2024) that Omar explicitly credits with furnishing an analytic vocabulary, so it bears on whether a sustained reading forms at all: Imran can name the space he cannot enter. It bears more visibly on expression. Arif offers no ideological analysis, yet describes exactly why what he perceives cannot be said; Dilruba "still could not say it to anyone." This converges with Neupane and Rana's (2026) account of performative compliance under English-medium mandates and with Muller's (2025) treatment of the gap between what is felt and what can be said as itself a datum.

This motivates the article's conceptual proposal: the conscientized-but-constrained position, in which a structural reading of policy, incipient or sustained, coexists with conditions foreclosing its institutional expression. The category names a threshold, not a type of person. In this sample the foreclosing condition is predominantly contractual (Arif, Dilruba, Sultana, Karim, Imran); Parveen shows that it can also be institutional, her sustained reading enacted covertly but never voiced. The position differs from constrained or covert agency in teacher-agency scholarship (Priestley et al., 2015; Tao & Gao, 2021) in specifying that what is foreclosed is the expression of a reading, not action in general.

The second argument concerns the conditionality of positional insight. The Hasina/Jahan–Rashid contrast on comparable fluency-weighted instruments is consistent with marginalisation affording sharper access to how evaluation works, as research on speakerhood hierarchies in teacher evaluation would anticipate (Selvi et al., 2024); the Hasina–Nilufar contrast is consistent with that access being conditional on resources rather than biography. A testable hypothesis follows: access to critical language policy scholarship may be a productive lever for structurally marginalised teachers (cf. Grad & Tudela-Isanta, 2025).

The third argument concerns the distance between individual critique and institutional change. Three of the four Configuration C participants produced no change to any policy text; the fourth reports a change that took three years, four signatories, and a convening space, and that excluded the contractually employed colleagues who supported it. This fits Archer's (1995) account of corporate-agent formation and the transformative-agency literature's emphasis on collective action and accompaniment (Goirigolzarri-Garaizar & Alonso, 2025; Otxotorena-Aranguren & Martín Rojo, 2025). What the present case adds, and where the contract argument is strongest, is that the collective was bounded by contract.

Methodologically, the two-subsession contrast is a procedure, not an instrument. Open to non-equivalent readings (scaffolding, narrative style, perceived relevance, trust), it shows how far elicitation shifts framing and should never certify a level.

The contribution is narrow by design: it does not establish how critical awareness develops, which Goirigolzarri-Garaizar and Alonso's (2025) collection addresses more directly. It offers a distinction those studies have less occasion to draw: between interpreting policy structurally, being able to say so, circulating that reading, organising collectively, and changing a policy text. It also refines the reflection–action framing of critical consciousness research (Diemer et al., 2021; Jemal, 2017): between reflection and action lies expression, and here it is expression that employment relation most visibly governs.

Conclusion, Implications, and Limitations

In answer to RQ1, across fourteen teachers at seven Bangladeshi private universities, naturalising interpretation co-occurs with English-medium formation irrespective of contract; incipient structural questioning without public expression co-occurs with Bangla-medium or madrasa formation, contractual employment, and junior rank; and sustained structural-ideological interpretation appears only alongside Bangla-medium formation, employment security, eight or more years' experience, and access to collegial scholarly space, with site mattering chiefly through UNI-A's concentration of English-medium teachers. In answer to RQ2, critique was voiced beyond the classroom only under secure employment, stayed student-facing or covert where institutional norms limited deliberation, and was organised collectively, and consequential for a policy text, only in one uncorroborated case whose signatories were bounded by contract.

For applied linguistics, the article contributes a vocabulary distinguishing interpretation, expression, circulation, organisation, and institutional change. For teacher education, it cautions against models treating critical awareness as uniformly achievable through training (Author, 2024): the resources such models presuppose are unequally distributed by employment relation (Author, 2023b), and dialogic praxis requires collective conditions such as peer community, protected time, and security (Author, 2015b; Daddow et al., 2024; Freire, 1970). For institutional governance, the defensible recommendation is to widen participation in policy deliberation and extend it to contractually employed staff, whose withdrawal from deliberation here reflected a realistic assessment of contractual risk.

The limitations are substantial. The design is cross-sectional and observes no process unfolding; structural attributes are entangled and cannot be separated by this design; classifications describe interpretive performances on single occasions; class is inferred only from mechanisms participants described; gender and madrasa formation (a single case) yielded no isolable mechanism; the sole instance of codified policy change is uncorroborated; and the class-reproductive functioning of evaluation instruments cannot be tested on this evidence. Longitudinal, matched-case, and within-site designs are the priority next steps.

Declarations

Author Contribution

The author was responsible for the conceptualisation, design, data collection, analysis and writing.

Data Availability

In view of confidentiality commitments, the full dataset is not publicly available; the documentary corpus list and anonymised extracts may be available from the author on reasonable request, subject to ethical constraints.

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