

Journal of Culture and Values in Education

https://cultureandvalues.org

E-ISSN: 2590-342X

Volume: 9 Issue: 3 2026

pp. 350-367

English Language Policy in Bedouin Secondary Schools: A Qualitative Case Study of Rahat

Samar Abu-Ghaith[*a] & Elana Shohamy[b]

* Corresponding author:
Email: Samarabughaith1@gmail.com
a. MA Program in TESOL, Jaime and Joan Constantiner School of Education, Tel Aviv University
b. Department of Language Education, Jaime and Joan Constantiner School of Education, Tel Aviv University

Article Info
Received: March 12, 2026
Accepted: July 24, 2026
Published: October 9, 2026

10.46303/jcve.2026.52

How to cite
Abu-Ghaith, S., & Shohamy, E. (2026). English Language Policy in Bedouin Secondary Schools: A Qualitative Case Study of Rahat. *Journal of Culture and Values in Education*, *9*(3), 350-367. https://doi.org/10.46303/jcve.2026.52

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ABSTRACT
Language-in-education policy is viewed as an agent of social mobility and equity in multilingual societies. However, its practices tend to produce linguistic hierarchies that threaten minority learners. This qualitative case study examined the adoption and institutional mediation of national English language education policy in Bedouin secondary schools in Rahat. The research analyzes the interaction between policy expectations, academic practices, and local sociolinguistic contexts through semi-structured interviews with teachers, students, and policymakers using a lens of Spolsky's model of language policy, Shohamy's critique of language policy, and Hornberger's biliteracy. Results show that policy discourse remains disconnected from classroom practice, such as test-driven instruction, structural under-resourcing, and the exclusion of students' multilingual repertoires. In this sense, English functions as a gatekeeping policy that shapes the trajectory of learning and contributes to cumulative educational stratification. Teachers use localized and/or contextualized pedagogical adaptations as an effort to reduce exclusion but these are informal and unsupported. In laying out the experience of Bedouin educators and students, this research provides new insight into English gatekeeping that is process-driven and contributes to international debates on language policy, multilingual education, and educational justice for the marginalized.

KEYWORDS
English language policy, Gatekeeping, Bedouin education, Multilingualism, Critical TESOL, Educational inequality, Language policy enactment.

INTRODUCTION

Language-in-education policies increasingly function as systems through which states negotiate inclusion, mobility, and social integration within multilingual societies. International studies have shown that while such policies are often constructed under the terms of equity and access, their application often reproduces linguistic hierarchies that disenfranchise minority learners, especially when dominant language ideologies emphasize standardized monolingual norms (Chang-Bacon, 2022; Cushing, 2023; Gazzola et al., 2023). English has increasingly become associated with high-stakes educational and professional contexts worldwide. It represents academic excellence, economic opportunities, and symbolic power. However, the availability of quality English instruction is not uniform among different socio-political groups (Boruah & Mohanty, 2022; Liu et al., 2024).

The current literature in Language Policy and Multilingual Education emphasizes the difference between policy discourses and classroom practices. Research on multilingualism in specific settings has also shown that multilingual language policies are often developed without regard for local ecological factors, the preparation of teachers, or the broader community context. For example, researchers have identified several instances where policies regarding multilingual education have been interpreted by both educators and members of their respective communities from a classroom/communal perspective as opposed to centralizing the development of these policies (Barruga, 2025; Gomes et al., 2026; Johnson & Sdunzik, 2023; Velasco, 2025). There are other studies conducted in Belgium and Nigeria wherein there was an emphasis on the tension between policy, institutional support, and classroom practices (Nwancha, 2026; Vanbuel & Van den Branden, 2023). It is important to note that the tensions are very evident within marginalized educational settings wherein the classroom practices take place amid resource limitations (Kosner, 2025; Velasco, 2025).

In terms of the larger, international debate, minority education in Bedouin secondary schools in Rahat provides an example of how the culturally stratified nature of language policy impacts multilingual students in an educational setting. Historically, Arabic has been the dominant language of community life while Hebrew has functioned as the predominant institutional/ administrative domain, and English has operated as the academic gatekeeper. This is further complicated by unequal resource distribution, curricular disparities, and the predominantly monolingual structure of most state universities are monolingual (Amara & Mar'i, 2002; Or & Shohamy, 2017). This is particularly the case among Bedouins living in the south of the Negev region, where language acquisition is associated with a history of socio-economic marginalization, geographical segregation, and underdeveloped educational systems (Al-Haj, 2012; Yiftachel, 1998).

The multiple linguistic expectations imposed upon the Bedouin pupils lead to more challenges in their education. Students are expected to understand Arabic as their domestic language, Hebrew as their official language, and English as their academic language. Despite these linguistic demands, multilingual educational support remains limited within many

Bedouin schools (Abu-Rabiah, 2025; Jabara, 2025; Saffuri, 2025). Research has further indicated that English instruction in Bedouin educational settings is frequently characterized by examination-oriented curricula, restricted opportunities for communicative language use, and limited professional support for teachers, all of which contribute to broader patterns of educational inequality (Abu-Gweder, 2025; Saffuri, 2025).

Rahat, the largest Bedouin city in the southern Negev region, serves as a major educational and social center for Bedouin communities and provides an important site for examining these dynamics. While Rahat enjoys formal recognition and comparatively greater institutional support than surrounding unrecognized villages, which are not acknowledged, it still embodies many of the structural constraints that limit Bedouin education in general. In addition to school practices, students' engagement with English is strongly mediated by local socioeconomic pressures, limited outside-the-classroom exposure to English and general cultural beliefs regarding language, in which Hebrew and Arabic are chosen for practical communication and social inclusion.

Current scholarship of language policy asserts that policies are not simply texts, but social practices embodied in everyday interaction in schools, families and communities (Smith-Christmas, 2024). From this perspective, language policy must be understood through the lens of how teachers, students, and policymakers interpret, negotiate, and sometimes contest official mandates. The empirical results of Spolsky's model for language policy in the context of minority education, where institutional goals are juxtaposed with local realities have revealed that differences between language practices, beliefs and management have been particularly relevant (Erliana et al., 2024; Van Oss et al., 2022).

In this theoretical and empirical context, the study explores the impact of national language policies on English language education in the Bedouin city of Rahat. Based on these focus areas regarding the perspectives of teachers, students, and policymakers, it examines the barriers to effective English learning and the contextually sensitive practices that result. It does so by adding to the international discourse on language policy implementation, multilingual education, and educational justice by situating the Bedouin case within the larger debate of equity, power, and language-in-education policy in marginalized communities.

A. Research Gap and Research Questions

Despite the research that has studied language-in-education policy implementation in multilingual and marginalized settings, there are significant gaps. The current research has primarily focused on macro-level policy design or ideological orientations with few studies emphasizing how English language policies are understood and implemented in everyday classroom practice for minorities. In this multilingual educational context, much research has focused on the relations between Arabic and Hebrew, while English as a high-stakes academic and mobility language has received comparatively limited scholarly attention, particularly in Bedouin education.

Moreover, research examining policy expectations that simultaneously takes into account the perspective of multiple actors, such as teachers, students, and policy-makers, is lacking. To help fill this gap, the current research explores the meaning-making processes in relation to policy implementation of English language education in the city of Rahat among the Bedouin population. The study aims at identifying how such policy is made sense of in light of the sociolinguistic situation and institutional contexts. Guided by the identified gaps, the study addresses the following research questions:

1. What forms of policy–practice misalignment emerge in the implementation of English language education policy in Bedouin secondary schools in Rahat?
2. How do multilingual classroom realities, limited exposure to English, and institutional educational conditions shape English language learning experiences among Bedouin students?
3. How do English teachers negotiate and mediate policy expectations within multilingual classroom contexts?
4. What policy and pedagogical adjustments are perceived by teachers, students, and policymakers as necessary to improve the effectiveness and equity of English language education in Bedouin schools?

LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

While present-day research has focused on language-in-education policy from a textual perspective, policy is not only a text but also a social process that is strongly influenced by ideology, power, and practice. By privileging dominant language practices and excluding minority linguistic repertoires, especially in contexts where monolingual or assimilationist ideals are entrenched in policy mechanisms (Chang-Bacon, 2022; Cushing, 2023; Gazzola et al., 2023), international research reveals that language policy functions as a mechanism of inclusion and exclusion. The concept of language policy as governmentality, in daily and mundane educational and linguistic practices, rather than in spontaneous proclamations, crafts subjectivities and educational pathologies (Yu & Johnson, 2023).

A second trend in the literature is the noted overlap between policy goals and classroom practice. Research in Nigeria, Southeast Asia, and the Philippines has reported that teachers' beliefs, assessment practices, insufficient professional development, and school pressures all limit the implementation of policies that explicitly promote multilingualism or equity (Lee et al., 2023; Nwancha, 2026; Velasco, 2025). In many cases, teachers serve as the agents of policy; they choose to enact or change mandates in accordance with local realities, student needs, and their own professional repertoires (Barruga, 2025; Vanbuel & Van den Branden, 2023). Yet without sustained structural support, such adaptations are usually individual and fragile, rather than embedded systemically.

English occupies a particularly contentious place in language-in-education policy. English is argued to be a neutral instrument for global engagement but is also criticized as a participant in neoliberal and elitist programs that reproduce educational and social inequality (Boruah &

Mohanty, 2022; Liu et al., 2024). Studies in Asia and Central Asia have shown that English-medium or English-based policies are often beneficial to urban and middle-income learners and that minority and rural students are less likely to have access to quality instruction and meaningful language use (Manan & Hajar, 2024; Wang & Gao, 2024; Yeleussiz & Qanay, 2025; Zhunussova & Ryspayeva, 2025). Critical and decolonial studies further question the status of English as an unquestioned norm; calling for justice-focused thinking that takes multilingualism as a resource and emphasizes the language identities and lived experience of learners (Canagarajah, 2024; Cushing & Govender, 2024; Kubota et al., 2022; Mpofu & Ndebele, 2025; Sah & Fang, 2025; Tleubay et al., 2025).

In the context of pedagogy, the literature indicates considerable divergence between multilingual communication and the exam-driven, normative system. Research in Europe and Latin America demonstrates that teachers are often expected to teach multilingual or inclusive learning methods without prior training in teacher preparation or professional development (Bergroth et al., 2022; Veliz et al., 2024). Young and experienced teachers alike, in marginalized communities, describe difficulty in balancing policy expectations, accountability demands, and social justice commitments that often lead to the practice of teacher-centered and form-centered practices (Romero, 2024). On top of that, studies of technology and language learning also show that while digital tools can increase exposure and engagement, their impact is limited in low-resource settings because of infrastructure and training limitations (Kukulska-Hulme et al., 2023).

Language policy research in Arabic–Hebrew bilingual educational systems has frequently documented structural disparities between majority and minority education sectors, focusing on the ways in which language functions as a symbolic and material channel of exclusion (Al-Haj, 2012; Golan-Agnon, 2006; Or & Shohamy, 2017). Much of this work has been devoted to Hebrew-Arabic relations, to the marginalization of Arabic in the public and institutional domains (Amara & Mar'i, 2002; Spolsky & Shohamy, 1999). Yet, English as a high-stakes academic language within this ecology has been less widely examined, even though research demonstrates that English proficiency mediates access to higher education and contributes to broader patterns of educational mobility and inequality (Hauptman et al., 2008; Saffuri, 2025).

Research specifically related to Bedouin communities also points to the growing challenges students experience within a linguistically complex and multilingual educational environment. A sense of belonging to Arabic as a language; the dominance of Hebrew in state institutions; and limited exposure to English outside the classroom are critical to the language experiences of Bedouin learners (Abu-Rabiah, 2025; Hauptman et al., 2008; Manor & Binhas, 2023).

According to recent research, examination-oriented curricula, gaps in teacher preparation, and limited institutional resources in Bedouin schools continue to constrain student achievement and motivation (Israel Action Task Force, 2019; Saffuri, 2025). Recent

scholarship also raises the possibility that school leadership and institutional practice limits or promotes mobility and equity for Arab and Bedouin students (Abu-Rabiah, 2025; Elmalak-Watad, 2025; Elmalak-Watad & Schechter, 2026).

In particular, the present study draws upon Spolsky's model of language policy, Shohamy's critical perspective on language policy, and Hornberger's continua of biliteracy framework. Spolsky's model conceptualizes language policy through the interaction of language practices, language beliefs, and language management, thereby helping explain the tensions between official educational policy and classroom realities (Spolsky, 2003; Van Oss et al., 2022). Shohamy's critical perspective emphasizes how language policies often operate through hidden mechanisms of power, assessment, and institutional control, particularly when language requirements function as gatekeeping devices rather than inclusive educational tools.

Hornberger's Continua of Biliteracy provides an example of the ways in which researchers have developed a comprehensive perspective on the study of multilingual development by showing how bilingualism develops through interaction between linguistic-social and educational realms as opposed to being predetermined as a normative model for monolingualism. It also shows that multilingual development occurs as a result of negotiation among various languages and contexts; media and relations of power; and how institutions can both enable or impede multilingual communication. This model is especially valuable when applied to English language learning among Bedouins in Rahat because Bedouin children learn Arabic, Hebrew, and English in socio-educational contexts that involve inequalities.

Collectively, they allow for better comprehension of the interpretation, negotiation, and implementation of policies for English-language education in the Bedouin city of Rahat. Placing the local example in the wider context of discussions about language policy, multilingual education, and educational equity, this study attempts to fill the research gap in the field by shedding light on how language policy can perpetuate or disrupt educational inequities.

METHODOLOGY

Design

This study employed a qualitative case study design to examine the implementation of English language education policy in Bedouin secondary schools in Rahat (Yin, 2018). It has been developed through an interpretivist qualitative research paradigm as it aims to look at how policy is enacted by individuals, their lived experiences and how they make sense of that policy enactment; all occurring within a multilingual and socio-economically disadvantaged schooling environment. As opposed to using an experimental or mixed methods design this study seeks to understand how participants make interpretations about, negotiate with, and experience English language policy within the daily routines of their schools. The application of a case study design was justified since the study sought to analyze Rahat not as an independent phenomenon, but as a case from which theories and analysis about the process of language

policy implementation and gatekeeping can be drawn regarding educational disparity in multilingual contexts.

Rahat was chosen due to its significance to studying the issues surrounding high-stakes English-language instruction, testing, and multilingual education in the presence of structural inequality. Additionally, Rahat is the largest Bedouin city in the Negev area and has the appropriate institutional complexity to allow for an analysis of policy-making within a qualitative research environment.

Participants

Purposive sampling was used to select participants who provided varied perspectives on the implementation of English language education policy. The sample included 15 English language teachers, 10 secondary school students, and 3 educational policymakers or supervisors responsible for curriculum implementation and oversight. Multi-stakeholder purposive sampling was consistent with the theoretical framework underlying language policy literature which sees policy as comprising discursive to implementation domains.

Teachers who are actively engaged in the English teaching process to students in secondary schools in Rahat were used as the first group under study. The students were selected among those in secondary schooling whose curriculum includes English as a required subject. Other groups were added to ensure the implementation of the curriculum policy and supervision of the educational sector. All subjects either belonged to the Bedouin community or were experts who worked in the field of Bedouin schooling. They had firsthand knowledge of the educational and sociolinguistic context. Participation was on a voluntary basis, and consent was sought before collecting data.

Instrument

Semi-structured interviews were the main data collection method. The interviews were designed through explorative qualitative techniques based on the principles of "what," "how," and "why" to elicit detailed descriptions of experiences, interpretations, and practices from the respondents.

Examples of interview questions included:

- What challenges do teachers and students experience in English language education?
- How do classroom practices reflect or differ from official policy expectations?
- Why is English perceived as important for educational progression and mobility?
- How do multilingual realities shape English language learning experiences in Bedouin schools?
- What institutional or pedagogical changes are needed to improve equity in English language education?

The semi-structured format ensured consistency across participant groups while also allowing flexibility for participants to elaborate on issues relevant to their experiences.

Data Collection

Teachers, students, and policymakers were interviewed to examine the phenomenon of English language learning; these included issues surrounding English teaching, implementation of policies, test pressure, and disparity between policy discourse and education practice.

The teacher interviews were on classroom instruction, curricular requirements, testing pressures, and professional constraints. The student interviews were on language attitudes, use of English inside and outside school, and educational difficulties. The policymaker interviews were on policy goals, the process of implementing the policies, and institutional constraints regarding English language education. The interviews were audio-recorded and conducted in the language preferred by each participant. All interviews were transcribed verbatim prior to analysis.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was used for this study. The interviews were analyzed through repeated readings to ensure familiarity with the views and experiences of the participants. Open coding was used to detect the recurring themes in the areas of policy implementation, multilingualism, teaching methods, assessments, and education disparity.

The analysis procedure involved the methodical repeated analysis and comparative evaluation of the interview transcripts so as to verify consistent and dependable analysis. The open codes established from participant response in this phase of analysis were then reduced to fewer and larger thematic categories which characterize the essential components of how English language policy is carried out at Rahat. Examples of the movement towards these larger thematic areas include the transition from "exam pressure" and "limited English exposure," and "bilingual classroom explanations," which were eventually categorized under the themes of policy-practice mismatch, negotiation around multiple languages, and gatekeeping impacts.

Analysis followed an iterative process involving the participants' point of view, theme identification, and interpretation of findings. The interpretation of the findings involved the use of Spolsky’s framework of language policy, Shohamy’s critical language policy and gatekeeping perspective, and Hornberger’s biliteracy continua framework.

Trustworthiness of Data

Ethical permission for this study was provided through the ethical guidelines for the Institution that conducted this research. To ensure confidentiality, pseudonyms were used to identify participants. All identifying information was also removed from the written responses and reports completed by each participant. To increase the trustworthiness and dependability of the results, several strategies were employed. These included utilizing multiple sources to collect data from different participant groups as an example of triangulation, using reflexive techniques to heighten the researchers' awareness of the decisions made throughout the analytical process, and creating a systematic record of all steps taken when coding themes. Audits were conducted throughout the analysis stage to document the process of coding and

theme formation. Furthermore, this study pointed out the importance of clarity and contextuality such that interpretations remained grounded on the experiences of the subjects.

FINDINGS

The qualitative findings revealed a persistent relationship between policy expectations and the lived experiences of Bedouin students. Interview data from teachers, students, and policymakers indicated that English functioned not only as a subject of instruction but also as a mechanism shaping educational access, progression, and legitimacy within the school system. Three components emerged: the assumption of English as a neutral, meritocratic norm, the structure of barriers to meaningful English learning, and the cumulative stratification effect of high-stakes English demands with multilingualism.

Policy–Practice Misalignment and Exam-Driven Instruction

Participants frequently identified an area of disconnection between the discourses of communicative competence at the policy level and classroom practice. Despite an emphasis on proficiency and academic readiness from official expectations, exams and a tight curricular focus led to most classroom practices. Teachers understood that instructional decisions were less a product of educational principles than of accountability demands for test results. As one teacher explained: “We know that is not how language is learned, yet the exam is what matters.”

This focus restricted learning in English to rehearsals of examinable content – no interaction, speaking, or authentic language use. Students reported that English is transmitted rather than actively practiced, reinforcing the exam-driven nature of instruction. This dynamic further reinforced the role of assessment as a mechanism limiting instructional flexibility and support and produced an educational environment that constrained students’ linguistic development.

Structural Constraints and Unequal Learning Conditions

The structural and social challenges of the students' learning environment created an unfavorable context for learning English. Additionally, chronic shortages of resources (e.g., textbooks), overcrowding in classrooms, limited hours allocated to teaching and high rates of teacher turnover, along with the lack of opportunity for their own professional development as teachers to support multilingual and at-risk students, all compounded the difficulty of the situation. As one student said: “English exists only in the classroom.” Teachers talked about children taught in worse conditions than those under which they were taught but were expected to have the same level of proficiency attained by similar children taught in schools with better scores. English proficiency was desired but not met; therefore, evaluation was exclusive rather than inclusive.

English in a Trilingual Educational Ecology

The students at Rahat are developing their English skills in an even more complicated multilingual environment than is typical in other bilingual and multilingual societies (Arabic, Hebrew & English). Participants reported that they perceive English as being somewhat

removed from them, yet it was viewed by the participants as an essential requirement for achieving high school diplomas and for attaining social mobility. Additionally, they reported that Hebrew is perceived as the official institutional language and Arabic as a source of empowerment and cultural identity.

One teacher remarked, “We use Arabic or Hebrew to explain because otherwise they don't understand, even though this is not written anywhere in the curriculum.” This situation also raised questions about the legitimacy and inclusiveness of English language instruction. Students perceived English as something outside of their linguistic environment and as a measure rather than a means of communication.

Stratification, Deficit Positioning, and Educational Consequences

The requirement for English proficiency affected students’ educational opportunities. Many participants referred to English as a “gatekeeper” because failing it had disproportionate consequences. As one participant explained: “You can repeat if you fail in math. Failure in English and then everything is over.” Even those students who were unsuccessful in English were retained or assigned to remedial classes regardless of their performance in other subjects. Teachers indicated that the teaching of English also affected school policies.

Deficit positioning emerged primarily within some teacher narratives rather than policymaker accounts. Although many teachers recognized structural inequalities affecting English learning, a number of participants occasionally framed students’ difficulties in terms of individual linguistic ability or motivation. One teacher commented: “They’re good kids, but not all of them speak English. Some of them just can’t.” Eventually, students themselves took these stories to heart and gave up. As one student put it: “You give up after a certain period. You do not like us, non-English speakers.” Together, these practices show how English gatekeeping operates cumulatively, with policy, assessment and discourse combining to normalize exclusion and reproduce inequality.

The key themes emerging from the qualitative analysis are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. Summary of Findings: English Policy Enactment in Rahat

Analytical Dimension	Manifestation in Practice	Key Consequences
Policy–practice gap	Exam-driven instruction replaces communicative goals	Reduced opportunities for speaking and communicative language use
Structural constraints	Under-resourcing, limited exposure, large classes	Limited access to English learning support and practice
Trilingual ecology	Arabic–Hebrew–English tensions unmanaged by policy	Frequent reliance on Arabic and Hebrew classroom mediation
Gatekeeping effects	English determines progression and tracking	Placement pressures associated with English examination performance

Overall, these findings reveal English as a political barrier, not an educational barrier. Since there is a balance between accountability, assessment, and discourses of deficiency, the

students who have found their language and material conditions conflicting with educational goals are always at a disadvantage of English proficiency needs. English is not an instrument of mobility but of filtering that elicits and predicts the future of learning, in two different ways.

DISCUSSION

The purposes of this research study were to assess the practices of English language education in Bedouin secondary schools in Rahat, their experiences, and the issues faced by teachers and students, the impact of local sociolinguistic and socioeconomic conditions, and how educators intertwine policy expectations into classroom practice. The findings indicate that English is not only a medium of education, but rather a means of access control through the power of policies, affecting the process of education and subsequent life prospects.

In contrast to Critical TESOL, such gatekeeping does not happen implicitly through exclusion but by way of the normalization of standardized criteria, assessment practices, and accountability narratives that presume an equal playing field at the outset. As concerns the first research question, the results reveal an ongoing disconnect between policy and practice. Although policies focus on communicative competence and equality of opportunity, most classroom practices are examination-oriented and graduation-focused. The perspectives of teachers illustrate the constraints of institutional accountability in shaping pedagogic choices, thereby confining the possibilities for interstitial languages. These trends have been observed elsewhere in multilingual or marginalized settings (Nwancha, 2026; Sah & Karki, 2023; Vanbuel & Van den Branden, 2023), yet in Rahat, this trend is further complicated by structural underfunding and high stakes attached to English in credentialing and mobility. With regard to the framework developed by Spolsky, these results reveal conflicting issues between language management policies and language use as practiced inside classes under institutional and testing pressure.

These results have something to do with the second research question, showing how local socio-cultural, socio-linguistic, and socio-economic factors affect English language acquisition. That means English becomes a necessary subject taught in the classroom but not a communicative tool since students have little contact with the English language outside the classroom, access to private lessons, and exposure to speaking in foreign languages. It corresponds to international research proving that the level of English skills is an interfering factor for low-resource environment students (Boruah & Mohanty, 2022; Wang & Gao, 2024). Also, for the Bedouins, a trilingual ecology of Arabic, Hebrew, and English can aggravate learning as students negotiate identities, institutions, and future aspirations across multiple linguistic domains (Abu-Rabiah, 2025; Manor & Binhas, 2023). Through such a process, English gains symbolic power that may be more important than its role as a teaching tool when it comes to being a gatekeeper. This can be demonstrated through Hornberger’s continua of biliteracy framework, as it emphasizes the importance of contextualization in language acquisition.

In the case of the third research question, it appears that English teachers are constantly negotiating between policy demands and student needs. Teachers cited bilingual explanations, content clarity in school activities, and curricular examples from cultures to maintain engagement. These practices embody justice-based pedagogical agency, a position that is consistent with the current findings of teacher-agent policy-making, not an inactive implementer (Erliana et al., 2024; Romero, 2024; Velasco, 2025). It also shows the limits of such agency. Such changes are informal, uneven, and unsupported by policy, illustrating the need for equity not be dependent on teacher initiative alone. Shohamy's critical perspective on language policy is particularly relevant here because it highlights how assessment systems and institutional expectations function as hidden policy mechanisms that shape classroom practice even when multilingual realities require alternative pedagogical approaches.

The fourth research question emphasizes the need for alternative methods of justice-based learning and assessment. The alternatives, from a Critical TESOL and language policy perspective, would be to disassociate English from one-sided high stakes decisions, to adopt formative, context-sensitive assessment strategies, and to legitimize multilingual repertoires as teaching resources rather than deviations. In this context, justice-oriented assessment would focus on student pathways to language learning, communication repertoire, and learning conditions rather than decontextualized measures. This would include institutional support for multilingual learning, pacing of curriculum that is reflective of the realities of instruction, and professional development based on critical and ecological approaches to language learning (Lee et al., 2023; Sah & Fang, 2025).

The findings further indicate that deficit positioning emerged through the interaction of policy expectations, assessment systems, and classroom discourse. Even when the teacher is open about structural limitations, students who have difficulty with English are often considered to lack ability or motivation. This individualization of failure echoes Critical TESOL analyses of raciolinguistic ideologies and symbolic power (Briceño et al., 2018; Chang-Bacon, 2022; Kubota et al., 2022). In Rahat, such discourses tend to internalize failure and narrow educational ambitions and are seen as a convergence of policy, assessment, and discourse that leads to normalizing inequality.

It is important to interpret the results in relation to the type of study. Considering this study is a qualitative instrumental case study, presented in a single Bedouin city, the analysis does not claim statistical generalizability. Rather, it has analytical and theoretical transferability that can contribute to other marginalized and multilingual societies where English is a concomitant requirement in unequal systems. Although the use of interview data emphasizes the participants' opinions about policy-making, triangulation across teachers, students, and policymakers adds credibility. Furthermore, future research through longitudinal classroom observation could further explore the changes in teaching practices as negotiations develop over time. Also, English is not examined alongside Arabic or Hebrew instruction in this ecologically trilingual environment, thereby inhibiting comparison across languages.

Together, and in direct response to the research questions, this study suggests that English language education in Bedouin schools is influenced by the convergence of policy mandates, sociolinguistic hierarchies, and accountability systems. As with the examples of India and China (Boruah & Mohanty, 2022; Liu et al., 2024), English is a form of symbolic and material gatekeeping that allows the learner access to resources more readily. By integrating Spolsky's emphasis on language practices and management, Shohamy's critique of hidden policy mechanisms, and Hornberger's ecological perspective on multilingualism, the analysis demonstrates how English language policy may institutionalize unequal educational experiences within marginalized multilingual contexts.

In interpreting the results, there are several limitations to this study. First, this qualitative instrumental case study was conducted in a single Bedouin city and was conducted with the goal of not just statistical generalizability but also analytical and theoretical transferability across a similar multilingual and marginalized educational context. Second, as the study relies primarily on semi-structured interviews, triangulation across teachers, students, and policymakers presents great credibility, but the absence of regular observation or longitudinal data limits an understanding of how classroom practice and policy affect young people. Third, while this study is situated in a holistic view of the trilingual ecology of English, it does not approach Arabic and Hebrew instruction in any specific detail, and this limitation affects comparisons across languages. Lastly, the study is interpretive rather than evaluative, and does not empirically evaluate any other pedagogical or assessment methods; therefore, the justice implications of the findings presented here need to be considered as solutions that are analytically grounded rather than tried interventions.

Overall, it supports the idea that English in Rahat is not a language subject or simply a means of mobility. It functions as a formal filter embedded in policy and practice that has implications for equity, identity, and education. To overcome such inequalities, students must move away from universalist norms and towards justice-based and contextually grounded approaches to instruction and assessment that challenge the policy frameworks of English education.

CONCLUSION

The present study focuses on teaching English in Bedouin secondary schools in Rahat, using Critical TESOL and language-policy as-process approaches. These findings show that English is not only a curricular subject, but also a gatekeeping mechanism that dictates access to graduation and postsecondary education. While policy discourse views English as a neutral path to mobility, its application through standardized benchmarks and high-stakes testing reproduces inequality because the sociolinguistic realities of learners and unequal access to resources are often ignored.

Besides describing the processes of exclusion, the article presents another idea, wherein English gatekeeping is portrayed as a naturalized phenomenon as opposed to being a

one-off policy or test situation. This illustrates how policies, accountability, pacing in the curriculum, and pedagogic practices combine to create a stratification pattern that is predictable but reinforces the discourse of equality. The process-oriented concept draws heavily from the Critical TESOL notion of English as symbolic capital in explaining the institutionalization of inequality in schools.

These findings offer another way to assess empirics in that they examine the voices of Bedouin teachers and students, a minority and indigenous population that is often overlooked in studies about TESOL and language policy. The fact that they explore the experiences of these people in the context of a multilingual environment and history of exclusion calls into question the existence of universal standards of English proficiency.

From the classroom perspective, it mirrors the ethical constraints that instructors confront in accountability-based systems. This highlights limited teaching methods and professional uncertainty despite teachers' use of regional adaptations and bilingual approaches to minimize exclusion. Emphasizing institutional acknowledgement of multilingual repertoires and context-sensitive assessment rather than dependence on individual teacher autonomy, the empirical data provide an initial foundation in the process of building equity in English education.

The study brings a justice-based assessment perspective to the policy level, where language policies are evaluated in relation to material effects rather than inclusive approaches. Without redefining the role of English in decision-making in high-stakes decision-making, policy reform can continue to be a superficial gesture, even in the name of meritocracy.

While this study is contextual, it provides theoretical applicability to other contexts of TESOL in which English is a requirement in inadequately funded schools. Future research may build on this finding by evaluating changes in admission processes through comparative or longitudinal approaches and the ways in which other assessment systems disrupt them.

In other words, this work bolsters scholarship on TESOL by placing English as a resource or barrier but also as a regulatory practice of structural scale. Policies shaping English instruction, assessment, and educational importance must therefore be reconsidered if equity in language education is to be achieved.

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