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Language, Power, and the Idea of Excellence: A Linguistic Ethnography of English Teaching in Beni Mellal's CPGE Center as a Case Study

Touhami Ahmed
Department of English, FLAM, Cadi Ayyad University, Marrakech
Email: ahmedtouhami1@gmail.com

Baghit Redouan
Department of English, Faculty of Letters and Humanities, Chouaib Doukkali University, El Jadida, Morocco
Email: baghit.r@ucd.ac.ma

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Abstract

This study examines how language functions as a medium of authority, distinction, and institutional belonging within the English classroom of a Moroccan Classe Préparatoire aux Grandes Écoles (CPGE) in Beni Mellal. Situated within Morocco's multilingual and postcolonial educational context, the article investigates how English, French, and Arabic varieties are differentially mobilized in a high-prestige and competitive academic setting where excellence is not just an evaluative ideal but a lived linguistic norm. Drawing on an eight-week linguistic ethnography with autoethnographic elements, the study analyzes classroom interaction, teacher reflection, student focus groups, written responses, and institutional documents. The analysis is informed by Bourdieu's concepts of linguistic capital and symbolic power and by Fairclough's critical discourse approach. The findings show that English operates as the principal language of academic legitimacy and intellectual discipline, French serves as a cognitive intermediary during moments of conceptual difficulty, and Moroccan Darija remains largely confined to affective reassurance and communicative repair. These patterned choices reveal a stratified linguistic order through which participation, confidence, and recognition are unevenly distributed. At the same time, the study demonstrates that teacher agency complicates the reproduction of these hierarchies; through adaptive multilingual practice, selective feedback, and locally designed materials, the classroom becomes not only a site where elite norms are enacted, but also one where they are negotiated. The article argues that academic excellence in CPGE is produced discursively through everyday linguistic practice and that any more equitable vision of excellence must reckon with the multilingual realities through which students learn, struggle, and claim legitimacy.

1. Introduction

The Classes Préparatoires aux Grandes Écoles (CPGE) occupy a distinctive position in Morocco's educational system. Designed to prepare top students for national and French competitive entrance examinations, these institutions are widely associated with intellectual rigor, social mobility, and selective opportunity. Admission is competitive, instruction is intensive, and academic success is viewed as a sign of distinction. Within this context, language plays a central yet often overlooked role. English, French, and Arabic circulate in complex

ways, each carrying specific symbolic and institutional meanings. English increasingly represents international mobility and modern competence; French retains its historical authority as the language of administration and prestige; Arabic functions as a signifier of national belonging and identity (Touhami & Jaafari, 2024a). The interaction among these languages creates a complex linguistic environment where communicative choices index academic status, disciplinary seriousness, and even social aspiration.

Despite CPGE's importance in Morocco's intellectual culture, little empirical research has examined how linguistic practices operate within this elite space. Studies of Moroccan education have often focused on language policy, multilingualism, and students' language attitudes (Bouziane, 2020; Ennaji, 2005), while classroom-based analyses of language use in high-prestige institutions remain rare. The absence of such research limits understanding of how linguistic behavior both reflects and sustains institutional ideologies of excellence. This gap is significant because discourse in elite education does more than transmit knowledge; it also constructs identities and hierarchies that define who is perceived as competent or legitimate. Examining the linguistic dynamics of CPGE can therefore clarify how educational prestige is enacted and reproduced through everyday classroom interaction.

This study investigates the relationship between language, power, and the construction of academic excellence in Moroccan CPGE English classrooms. It explores how teachers and students use language to perform intellectual authority, discipline, and belonging within an environment where linguistic choice is socially and symbolically charged. The analysis draws on data from an eight-week linguistic ethnography in a Beni Mellal CPGE center where the researcher serves as the sole English instructor. The site provides a unique opportunity to document English teaching in a setting that lacks a standardized textbook and relies instead on a national Scope and Sequence framework based on the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) (Baghit et al., 2024b). This pedagogical flexibility, coupled with strong institutional expectations of excellence, makes language a key resource through which teachers and students negotiate academic norms.

Language in Moroccan elite education cannot be studied apart from its sociopolitical background. Morocco's linguistic scene remains influenced by colonial history and global economic pressures. French continues to carry strong institutional authority, while English is increasingly associated with international mobility, technology, and new academic opportunity (Bouziane & Saoudi, 2021; Ennaji, 2005). Within CPGE, both languages coexist with Standard Arabic and Moroccan Arabic, producing multilingual practices that often blur formal boundaries. In this study, Arabic is not treated as a single uniform code. A distinction must be made between Standard Arabic, which carries formal, religious, and pan-Arab symbolic prestige, and Moroccan Darija, the vernacular variety more commonly used in spontaneous everyday interaction. In the classroom episodes discussed here, Arabic used for clarification, repair, or reassurance is best understood as Moroccan Darija unless otherwise indicated.

This multiplicity is not only functional; it encodes relations of power and prestige. Bourdieu's (1991) concept of linguistic capital provides a useful framework for understanding how certain forms of language acquire legitimacy in specific fields. In CPGE, mastering good English or academic French often signals not solely linguistic proficiency but also alignment with an institutional culture of precision and excellence. Such linguistic expectations contribute to what Fairclough (1995) describes as the naturalization of power through discourse: ways of speaking and writing that appear neutral but in fact privilege particular identities and histories.

The ideological weight of excellence in CPGE further complicates this linguistic field. The term functions as a social norm that regulates behavior, evaluation, and self-perception. Teachers and students internalize a discourse where excellence equals intellectual discipline, linguistic accuracy, and moral seriousness. While this discourse motivates achievement, it can also narrow what counts as valid expression or thought. Language becomes a gatekeeping tool that distinguishes the "serious" from the "ordinary." This study approaches excellence not as

an abstract virtue but as a linguistic practice that manifests in classroom routines, feedback, and evaluative comments. By focusing on how such practices are produced through talk, writing, and institutional documents, the study situates linguistic interaction at the core of educational elitism.

The research adopts a qualitative linguistic ethnography with autoethnographic elements. The insider position of the researcher allows access to both the micro-level of classroom communication and the macro-level of institutional expectations. This dual perspective is crucial in settings where teachers design their own materials and pedagogical discourse, effectively creating local versions of national policy. The lack of a fixed textbook, for example, means that linguistic ideologies are mediated through teacher-made tasks and feedback practices. Studying these artifacts can show how abstract policy notions such as "rigor," "accuracy," and "mastery" are interpreted in everyday instruction.

The study is guided by two questions:

- How are linguistic practices in CPGE English classrooms used to express and regulate ideas of academic excellence?
- What ideologies of language and power inform these practices?

Addressing these questions contributes to broader discussions of language, identity, and hierarchy in postcolonial education (Touhami & Jaafari, 2024a). It positions the Moroccan CPGE as a relevant site for examining how global linguistic hierarchies interact with local institutional traditions. While related analyses of language, mobility, and distinction have been conducted in other settings (e.g., Bae & Park, 2016; Heller, 2003), few have considered North African contexts where multilingualism intersects with colonial legacies and new global orientations. The Moroccan case thus extends existing scholarship on linguistic capital and elite education by highlighting how English teaching operates within a trilingual, postcolonial setting.

Beyond theoretical contribution, the study holds pedagogical relevance. English is increasingly central to Moroccan higher education reforms, yet little attention has been paid to how teachers conceptualize excellence or manage multilingual realities in their classrooms. Understanding how linguistic norms function in CPGE may inform more inclusive pedagogical practices that value communicative competence over symbolic conformity. Moreover, examining the subtle mechanisms through which authority is established in language teaching can help educators recognize how feedback, correction, and praise contribute to students' sense of legitimacy (Baghit et al., 2024a).

In conclusion, this research situates CPGE English classrooms as micro-contexts where national ideologies of excellence and global discourses of English intersect. It investigates how participants use language to navigate, sustain, or contest these discourses. Through a critical and ethnographic framework, the study seeks to document not only what is said but how saying it reproduces relations of power and aspiration. By analyzing language as practice rather than as code, the study contributes to ongoing efforts to understand education as a site of social differentiation and symbolic negotiation in Morocco.

2. Theoretical Framework

The study of language within educational settings requires a framework that recognizes how language functions not only as communication but as a site of power, ideology, and identity (Touhami & Jaafari, 2024a). Two conceptual lenses guide this analysis. First, the notion of linguistic capital and symbolic power as theorized by Pierre Bourdieu; and second, the perspective of Norman Fairclough's critical discourse analysis (CDA). These frameworks help situate the linguistic practices of elite education—not only what is said, but how it aligns with institutional expectations, social positioning, and discursive norms.

2.1. Linguistic Capital and Symbolic Power

Bourdieu's theory emphasizes that language is a resource embedded in social relationships and structured by power dynamics (Bourdieu, 1991). In Language and Symbolic Power, Bourdieu argues that linguistic utterances function within a "linguistic market" where agents deploy accumulated linguistic skills (linguistic capital) to gain recognition and legitimacy (Bourdieu, 1991). He posits that an individual's habitus—durable dispositions shaped by past conditions—interacts with the field, or social space, in which linguistic exchanges occur (Bourdieu, 1991). In this account, utterances are not only vehicles of meaning; they also index authority and social value (Bourdieu, 1991).

In educational fields, linguistic capital may take the form of proficiency in a high-status language variety, correct register, or mastery of academic discourse. These resources become convertible into symbolic capital—prestige or recognition—when they are acknowledged as legitimate by institutional or social actors. Relatedly, symbolic power refers to the capacity to impose meanings and norms such that dominated agents accept them as legitimate (Bourdieu, 1991). In other words, linguistic practices that accord with dominant norms are invisibly reinforced and re-produced, contributing to social reproduction (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977).

Applied to elite education contexts, such as the CPGE setting in Beni Mellal-Morocco, Bourdieu's framework enables us to explore how students and teachers engage with language not simply to communicate ideas, but to position themselves within institutional hierarchies of excellence. Fluency in English or French, adoption of a certain register, or adherence to normative academic discourse may operate as markers of belonging to an elite educational space and hence as forms of linguistic capital.

2.2. Critical Discourse Analysis

Complementing Bourdieu's focus on language and power, Fairclough's CDA presents discourse as a form of social practice that both shapes and is shaped by societal structures (Fairclough, 1995). According to Fairclough (1995), discourse both shapes social relations and is shaped by them. He further articulates a three-dimensional model for analysis: (1) the text or interaction itself, (2) the discursive practice of production, distribution, and consumption of texts, and (3) the social practice in which discourse is embedded (Fairclough, 1995).

CDA holds that language plays a role in maintaining and transforming power relations. Fairclough (2015) explains in his ground-breaking book Language and Power that discourse and power are linked because certain discursive practices normalize particular ways of seeing and being, thereby making power relations appear natural rather than contingent. In educational settings, feedback, evaluation, and classroom interaction can be sites where discursive practices enact authority, discipline, and academic norms.

In the elite educational field under investigation, CDA provides tools to analyze how classroom talk, teacher commentary, and institutional texts (for example, the Scope and Sequence framework) reproduce or challenge dominant ideologies of language and excellence. By mapping how language functions across multiple levels—interactional, textual, and institutional—CDA enables the researcher to link micro-linguistic practices with broader sociocultural processes.

2.3. Integrating the Frameworks

Combining Bourdieu's and Fairclough's frameworks offers a coherent lens for this study. Bourdieu supplies a conceptual vocabulary for understanding how linguistic resources circulate as capital and how language functions within fields characterised by competition and hierarchy. Fairclough contributes methodological tools for unpacking how those resources are enacted through discourse and how power is embedded in linguistic practices. Together, they allow for an analysis of how excellence is not only a pedagogical goal but a discursive performance mediated through language.

In the Moroccan CPGE context, language does more than facilitate instruction; it becomes a marker of legitimacy. Students' and teachers' linguistic choices may reflect or resist

institutional norms regarding what constitutes good performance, academic seriousness, or elite identity. For example, privileging English over Arabic—or particular registers over others—may operate as a mechanism of distinction, aligning with Bourdieu's notion of linguistic capital. At the same time, the classroom interaction that enacts those choices can be analysed via CDA to reveal how power relations, discipline, and identity are negotiated in situ.

The integrated framework helps address the study's research questions. First, by examining how linguistic practices express and regulate ideas of academic excellence, the study will trace how classroom discourse embodies linguistic capital and symbolic legitimacy. Second, by exploring the ideologies of language and power that underpin those practices, the study will apply CDA to uncover how institutional, teacher, and student discourses contribute to reproducing or challenging elite linguistic norms.

To conclude, this theoretical framework provides the foundation for investigating the linguistic ecology of excellence in Beni Mellal CPGE English classes. It enables a dual-focus on the resources that students and teachers bring—and acquire—and on the discursive structures that make those resources meaningful within a competitive, high-status educational field.

3. Methodology

This study employs a qualitative linguistic ethnography with autoethnographic elements to examine the role of language in constructing academic excellence within Moroccan CPGE English classrooms. The approach allows for the analysis of both classroom interaction and institutional discourse while incorporating the researcher's insider perspective as the sole English instructor at the Beni Mellal CPGE center. This methodology is suitable for contexts where researchers have direct access to participants and pedagogical practices and aims to capture the intersection between micro-level classroom language and macro-level institutional ideologies (Blommaert, 2005; Rampton, 2006).

3.1. Research Site and Participants

The research was conducted at a CPGE center in Beni Mellal, Morocco. The site is distinctive as the only center in the city offering CPGE English instruction, which provides a unique opportunity to study local teaching practices in depth. Participants included approximately 30 students across two classes, aged 18–20, all of whom were enrolled in the first year of CPGE programs in humanities and social sciences. The researcher served as both instructor and observer, enabling access to classroom interactions, pedagogical decision-making, and material design processes. All participants provided informed consent, and ethical approval was obtained from the institution's review board.

3.2. Data Collection

Data were collected over an eight-week period using four complementary sources:

1. Classroom Observation: Five full-length English lessons were audio-recorded and transcribed. Observations focused on teacher-student interaction, forms of feedback, disciplinary practices, and code-switching among English, French, and Arabic varieties, especially Moroccan Darija in moments of clarification and reassurance. The recordings allowed for detailed analysis of verbal and paralinguistic features, including tone, emphasis, and turn-taking patterns.
2. Autoethnographic Teaching Journal: The researcher maintained a reflective journal documenting pedagogical decisions, linguistic choices, and perceptions of student engagement. Entries addressed how classroom tasks, instructions, and corrective practices were implemented and adapted to align with both the Scope and Sequence framework and perceived standards of excellence.
3. Student Focus Groups and Written Reflections: Two focus groups, each comprising 5–6 students, were conducted to explore students' perceptions of linguistic norms,

feedback, and expectations of excellence. Open-ended questions encouraged participants to reflect on how language influenced their engagement and identity as CPGE students. Written reflections supplemented focus group data, providing additional insight into student experiences.

4. Document Analysis: Institutional materials, including the national Scope and Sequence based on the CEFR framework and teacher-designed lesson plans and worksheets, were examined to identify the ways in which language expectations and evaluative criteria were embedded within pedagogical materials.

3.3. Analytical Procedures

The analysis followed a thematic and critical discourse framework. Classroom transcripts, student responses, and autoethnographic journal entries were coded thematically to identify recurring patterns related to authority, evaluation, and student positioning. Critical discourse analysis (Fairclough, 1995) was applied to examine how these patterns reproduced or contested ideologies of linguistic and academic excellence. Particular attention was given to code-switching practices, teacher evaluative language, and the structure of classroom discourse, linking micro-level interactions to macro-level social and institutional norms.

Document analysis complemented classroom and student data by tracing how the Scope and Sequence framework and teacher-generated materials operationalized abstract expectations of proficiency and academic rigor. The integration of these data sources enabled triangulation, enhancing the validity of findings and providing a comprehensive view of linguistic practice within the CPGE environment.

3.4. Ethical Considerations

Ethical principles were strictly observed throughout the study. Students participated voluntarily and were informed about the research purpose, data collection methods, and confidentiality measures. All audio recordings and written reflections were anonymized. The researcher maintained reflexivity throughout the study, recognizing the dual role as teacher and investigator and reflecting on how this position might influence interaction, observation, and interpretation of data.

3.5. Rationale for Methodological Choices

The combination of linguistic ethnography and autoethnography provides a robust framework for investigating language as a social practice in elite educational settings. Linguistic ethnography allows the study to capture classroom dynamics and the situated use of language (Blommaert, 2005). Autoethnography leverages the researcher's insider perspective to access nuanced understanding of pedagogical decision-making and institutional expectations (Ellis et al., 2011). Together, these approaches support a detailed examination of how linguistic practices both reflect and shape perceptions of excellence, offering insight into the social mechanisms of elite education in Morocco.

3.6. Limitations

While the single-site, insider approach provides depth and detailed access, it may limit generalizability to other CPGE centers. Additionally, the dual role of researcher-teacher requires careful reflexivity to mitigate potential bias in interpretation. The study addresses these limitations by employing multiple data sources and triangulating findings to ensure credibility and reliability.

4. Findings

The data collected over eight weeks in the CPGE classroom in Beni Mellal reveal consistent linguistic and pedagogical patterns that reflect how academic excellence, linguistic hierarchy, and teacher agency operate in this elite Moroccan educational context. Across the eight sessions focused on essay-writing methodology, English remained the dominant instructional

code, yet the classroom discourse was shaped by pragmatic shifts between English, French, and Arabic. These shifts were not random but reflected complex negotiations of authority, comprehension, and belonging. The findings are organized around five interrelated themes: language hierarchies and access, participation and interactional dynamics, feedback practices and communicative priorities, ideologies of academic excellence, and teacher agency in a resource-limited environment.

4.1. Language Hierarchies and Access

English functioned as the default language of instruction throughout the eight sessions. It signaled authority, intellectual rigor, and alignment with CPGE's ethos of elite academic training. French was used strategically when abstract academic concepts—such as "coherence," "counterargument," or "rhetorical precision"—proved difficult to grasp. Moroccan Darija was employed only as a last resort, primarily when clarification was essential for students who remained silent or confused after English and French explanations.

This three-tier linguistic structure—English for authority, French for mediation, and Moroccan Darija for accessibility—suggests a hierarchy that mirrors broader sociolinguistic power relations in Morocco. While English represents global intellectual prestige, French retains its historical role as a language of cognitive and institutional legitimacy. Moroccan Darija, though the students' shared linguistic resource, is largely excluded from legitimate classroom discourse, used only to repair communication breakdowns. This pattern demonstrates how linguistic capital (Bourdieu, 1991) operates as both a pedagogical and symbolic force in CPGE spaces, reinforcing the association of advanced English competence with academic excellence and social distinction.

The teacher's own discourse reinforces this hierarchy while simultaneously attempting to mitigate its exclusionary effects. The consistent use of English positions the teacher as an authority figure whose linguistic control embodies CPGE ideals of rigor and intellectual discipline. Yet the selective resort to French and, more rarely, Moroccan Darija reflects a conscious attempt to democratize access to meaning without undermining the symbolic value of English. This dual role—maintaining linguistic legitimacy while ensuring comprehension—illustrates the tension between inclusivity and elitism embedded in the CPGE language classroom.

Table 1 Frequency of Language Use Across Eight CPGE Sessions

Session	English Use (%)	French Use (%)	Arabic Use (%)
1	90	8	2
2	88	10	2
3	85	12	3
4	87	10	3
5	90	7	3
6	88	9	3
7	89	8	3
8	91	7	2

Note. English accounted for an average of 88–91% of classroom discourse, reflecting its status as the primary language of authority. French averaged around 9%, functioning as a conceptual support language. Moroccan Darija remained below 3%, used primarily when comprehension completely failed. The consistency of these proportions emphasizes the institutionalized linguistic hierarchy within the CPGE classroom.

4.2. Participation and Classroom Dynamics

Across the eight sessions, a stable participation pattern emerged; roughly ten to twelve students engaged actively and voluntarily, while the remaining group remained mostly silent unless called upon. This distribution was consistent throughout, regardless of topic or activity

type. Students who demonstrated confidence in using English tended to dominate class discussions, offering extended answers, asking follow-up questions, or volunteering examples. Others hesitated, often pausing or resorting to French or Arabic when struggling to articulate ideas.

This uneven participation reflects more than linguistic competence; it reveals how students internalize the social meanings attached to language use. Those who command English fluently appear to embody CPGE's unspoken ideal of academic excellence, while others perceive their linguistic insecurity as intellectual inadequacy. As such, language proficiency becomes a visible marker of belonging and success within the group. The classroom thus reproduces, in miniature, the sociolinguistic hierarchies that define Moroccan elite education.

The teacher's strategies aimed to counterbalance this asymmetry through inclusive questioning and encouragement. However, participation remained stratified, indicating that linguistic authority is not easily redistributed through pedagogy alone. The findings suggest that linguistic hierarchies in CPGE are internalized at both structural and affective levels, shaping how students perceive themselves as "capable" or "legitimate" participants in academic discourse.

Table 2 Participation Distribution in CPGE English Class Sessions

Session	Active Participants	Prompted Participants	Silent Participants
1	12	8	8
2	11	9	8
3	12	8	8
4	10	9	9
5	12	8	8
6	11	9	8
7	12	8	8
8	11	9	8

Note. On average, 10–12 students (roughly 40% of the class) actively participated without prompting, while the remaining 60% required encouragement or remained silent. The consistency of this pattern suggests a stable linguistic hierarchy where confidence in English mediates access to participation.

4.3. Feedback Practices and Communicative Priorities

Feedback practices across the sessions emphasized fluency over accuracy. During oral exchanges, the teacher consistently avoided interrupting students to correct grammatical or lexical errors, intervening only when meaning was at risk. This approach encouraged continuity in students' speech and reduced anxiety during participation. Written feedback, by contrast, was more focused on accuracy and organization, reflecting the academic nature of essay-writing instruction.

This balance between communicative freedom and written precision aligns with the CPGE's dual expectation: students must demonstrate linguistic competence that is both performative and academically structured. The teacher's decision to prioritize fluency in oral tasks reflects an understanding of confidence as a pedagogical necessity. It also highlights a pragmatic adaptation to the linguistic insecurities that silence many students.

Interestingly, students' code-switching behavior during feedback moments reveals how they perceive correction. When unsure, students tended to seek reassurance in French, saying phrases such as "C'est bon, sir?" or "Est-ce que c'est correct?" This indicates that French continues to function as an intermediary of validation—a linguistic space where academic authority feels more familiar and less intimidating. Thus, even corrective interactions

reproduce the multilingual hierarchy of the classroom, where linguistic legitimacy is distributed unequally across codes.

4.4. Ideologies of Academic Excellence

The data indicate that English proficiency is tightly linked to perceptions of intelligence and discipline within the classroom community. Students who use complex or extended English sentences are often praised explicitly, while hesitant or code-switching students receive neutral acknowledgment or gentle redirection. These interactional patterns subtly reinforce the ideology that linguistic competence in English equates to intellectual merit.

This ideology is not explicitly taught but enacted through daily pedagogical routines. The teacher's discourse—focused on clarity, coherence, and organization—reflects institutional values that associate "good writing" with structured thinking. Such practices reflect Fairclough's (1992) argument that discourse can become naturalized, so that certain linguistic behaviors come to represent intellectual and moral virtues. In the CPGE context, English functions as both a pedagogical tool and a gatekeeping mechanism, distinguishing those who embody elite linguistic capital from those who simply aspire to it.

At the same time, the teacher's reflective notes reveal a conscious awareness of this dynamic. Efforts to encourage hesitant students and normalize linguistic struggle suggest a subtle resistance to the institutional ideology of excellence as fluency. This pedagogical empathy marks a tension between the teacher's inclusive values and the structural elitism embedded in CPGE's language culture.

4.5. Teacher Agency and Resource Adaptation

The absence of a standardized textbook has compelled the teacher to design all instructional materials, using the national Scope and Sequence as a flexible reference. This necessity, while challenging, has fostered a high level of pedagogical autonomy and creativity. Lesson design has been guided not by fixed content but by CEFR outcomes and classroom realities. Tasks were frequently modified to address observed difficulties—for example, simplifying reading passages, designing bilingual glossaries, or providing structured outlines for essay components.

Such adaptations highlight the teacher's agency within institutional constraints. Rather than passively following prescribed norms, the teacher actively negotiates between institutional expectations, linguistic hierarchies, and learner needs. This negotiation demonstrates how local practice redefines official frameworks. The Scope and Sequence, designed as a national roadmap, becomes in practice a contextual instrument—reinterpreted to suit the linguistic and intellectual profile of CPGE students in Beni Mellal.

This adaptive agency also shapes the classroom discourse of authority. The teacher's control over materials positions them as both gatekeeper and mediator of excellence, while also humanizing the learning process by responding to students' concrete needs. The data thus reveal that the teacher's autonomy, far from undermining standardization, enriches the CPGE mission by grounding it in lived pedagogical realities.

Table 3 Summary of Emerging Patterns

Pattern	Frequency	Implication
English as main instructional code	8/8 sessions	Symbolic of authority and academic prestige
French as cognitive mediator	5/8 sessions	Tool for conceptual accessibility
Moroccan Darija as last resort	3/8 sessions	Affective and communicative fallback
Active student participation (10–12)	8/8 sessions	Stable hierarchy of engagement
Fluency prioritized over correction	7/8 sessions	Pedagogical emphasis on confidence and expression

4.6. Synthesis

The findings show that the CPGE English classroom in Beni Mellal functions as a microcosm of Morocco's linguistic and educational hierarchies. English represents symbolic capital, French operates as a cognitive bridge, and Moroccan Darija retains affective but marginal legitimacy. The classroom discourse of "excellence" aligns with these hierarchies, shaping how students perceive themselves and their peers. Yet within this structure, teacher agency introduces flexibility, empathy, and context-sensitive adaptation, creating moments where linguistic elitism is negotiated rather than simply reproduced.

Overall, these findings suggest that the CPGE English classroom is both a site of reproduction and subtle transformation. Language is not just a medium of instruction but a social force through which authority, aspiration, and identity are continuously negotiated.

5. Discussion

The findings from the CPGE classroom in Beni Mellal demonstrate that language use in elite Moroccan education extends far beyond communication; it functions as an instrument of classification, aspiration, and negotiation. The consistent dominance of English in the classroom, supported by selective recourse to French and rare use of Arabic, reflects a structured hierarchy that mirrors Morocco's historical and sociopolitical realities. Within this trilingual dynamic, English operates as a marker of distinction, French as an intellectual intermediary, and Moroccan Darija as an affective fallback. Each language carries symbolic weight that students and teachers navigate daily, revealing how pedagogy is inseparable from broader cultural hierarchies.

These findings confirm that the CPGE English classroom embodies a microcosm of Morocco's stratified linguistic market. Following Bourdieu's (1991) notion of linguistic capital, English functions as a form of symbolic power that grants legitimacy to those who master it. The teacher's consistent use of English consolidates this power, making language not only a pedagogical tool but also an emblem of authority. Yet, the occasional resort to French and Arabic indicates a tension between authority and accessibility—between the prestige of English and the pragmatic need to reach all students. This tension reflects what Heller (2003) describes as the commodification of language, where linguistic competence becomes both a resource and a barrier, valued as an indicator of intellectual worth but unevenly distributed among learners.

In this context, the students' participation patterns gain sociological significance. The fact that a consistent core of 10 to 12 students actively participate while others remain largely silent is not a mere matter of confidence; it exposes the social consequences of linguistic stratification. Those who possess strong English proficiency align themselves with the institution's vision of excellence, while the silent majority occupy a peripheral space that reflects the marginalization of non-elite linguistic identities in the national context. Participation therefore becomes a site where symbolic domination (Bourdieu, 1991) is reproduced through language, shaping not only academic outcomes but also students' sense of belonging.

However, the teacher's agency complicates this picture. While English remains the primary language of instruction, the deliberate use of French and Arabic when comprehension fails reflects an ethical stance against exclusion. It shows that pedagogical authority is not just about maintaining linguistic purity but about balancing institutional expectations with human responsiveness. The teacher's refusal to interrupt fluency for minor corrections, and their strategic encouragement of hesitant students, demonstrate a form of resistance to the rigid discourse of excellence that often governs CPGE classrooms. This aligns with Canagarajah's (2013) argument that multilingual pedagogies can resist the homogenizing tendencies of

English-dominant education by validating local linguistic resources as legitimate tools of meaning-making.

The absence of a prescribed textbook, while initially a constraint, also enabled innovation and contextual sensitivity. The teacher's reliance on the Scope and Sequence framework, rather than fixed materials, allowed lessons to evolve according to student needs and classroom realities. This adaptability underscores the potential of teacher agency in systems that otherwise promote standardization. By designing original materials, the teacher not only filled a curricular gap but also reshaped what "excellence" means in the local context—from rigid conformity to flexible understanding. This practice resonates with Holliday's (2005) view of appropriate methodology, where pedagogy must emerge from the sociocultural realities of learners rather than from imported norms.

Another important insight emerging from the data is the ideological link between linguistic mastery and perceived intelligence. The classroom discourse consistently associates articulate English with intellectual rigor. Praise for fluent students reinforces the idea that linguistic competence equates to cognitive superiority. This correlation, while unintended, reflects an ingrained ideology within CPGE education—one that equates academic worth with proximity to global linguistic standards. Yet, this belief risks alienating students whose competence lies outside the boundaries of English fluency. The teacher's empathetic responses to hesitant students indicate awareness of this tension and suggest that critical reflection on linguistic ideology is possible even within elite educational structures.

Moreover, the strategic use of French during moments of conceptual difficulty exposes the enduring colonial residue in Morocco's academic culture. Despite English's growing global prestige, French continues to function as an epistemic intermediary—a "comfort zone" where both teacher and students locate academic legitimacy. This interplay between English and French reflects what Silverstein (2003) calls indexical order, where languages index different social values within a given hierarchy. In CPGE, English indexes global intellectual modernity, French indexes institutional tradition, and Arabic indexes cultural intimacy but limited academic power. Understanding this interplay is essential for designing future policies that recognize multilingualism not as a deficit but as an asset.

The role of Arabic in this configuration deserves particular attention. The marginalization of Arabic in the CPGE classroom is not uniform: Moroccan Darija remains pragmatically available for repair and reassurance, even as it is symbolically subordinated to English and French within the linguistic economy of elite education. When students revert to Darija under communicative pressure, they draw on a familiar vernacular resource that provides reassurance, solidarity, and immediate intelligibility. This phenomenon can be read through Pennycook's (2010) concept of language as a local practice, a reminder that even within elite institutions, local languages persist as instruments of comfort, solidarity, and resistance. While Darija may not carry the same institutional prestige as English or French, it retains important social value as a language of reassurance and belonging.

The overall classroom ecology thus reflects a coexistence of reproduction and transformation. On one hand, the CPGE English class reproduces Morocco's linguistic hierarchies, privileging English and French over Arabic. On the other hand, through pedagogical empathy and adaptive practice, it also disrupts the binary between "elite" and "excluded." The teacher's inclusive strategies, designed in response to real-time observations, show that classroom practice can humanize institutional discourse. This suggests that the locus of change in Moroccan elite education may lie not in policy but in teacher-driven reflection and adaptation.

Furthermore, the findings challenge the assumption that linguistic proficiency alone guarantees academic success. While fluency in English remains an institutional ideal, the classroom evidence indicates that comprehension, confidence, and engagement are equally decisive. Students who hesitate linguistically often display high levels of analytical reasoning in their written work once anxiety is mitigated. This distinction accentuates that language is

both a tool and a barrier—capable of empowering thought but also of constraining it when loaded with ideological weight.

In light of these observations, the CPGE English classroom emerges as a dynamic negotiation space where teacher agency, linguistic ideology, and student identity intersect. The teacher operates within multiple pressures: institutional expectations of excellence, students' diverse linguistic repertoires, and limited curricular guidance. Yet, by maintaining an adaptive stance, the teacher converts constraints into opportunities for authentic learning. This supports Freire's (1996) vision of education as a dialogic act—an interaction where meaning is co-constructed rather than transmitted.

Overall, the discussion points to a paradox at the heart of CPGE English education: while the program promotes global competitiveness through English, it also risks perpetuating internal inequalities rooted in linguistic access. However, the teacher's practice demonstrates that such hierarchies can be softened through conscious pedagogical choices that foreground empathy, inclusivity, and local relevance. Recognizing the legitimacy of all linguistic resources—English, French, Standard Arabic, and Moroccan Darija—could redefine excellence in Moroccan CPGE not as conformity to external standards but as the ability to think critically and communicate meaningfully across linguistic boundaries.

6. Conclusion and Implications

The present study examined how linguistic practices within a CPGE English classroom in Beni Mellal both reflect and challenge the social hierarchies that define elite education in Morocco. Over eight weeks of observation and reflection, the data revealed a structured pattern in which English dominated as the main language of instruction, supported by occasional recourse to French and, rarely, Arabic. This linguistic order mirrors national hierarchies where language operates as a marker of intellectual legitimacy and social distinction. However, the study also demonstrated how teacher agency and reflective practice can disrupt these patterns and open spaces for inclusivity and critical engagement.

At the center of the findings is the paradox of English as both an instrument of empowerment and a mechanism of exclusion. Its dominance in CPGE aligns with institutional aspirations toward global academic competitiveness, positioning it as a symbol of progress and prestige. Yet, as the data show, this dominance risks marginalizing students who lack confidence or fluency in English, producing uneven access to participation. The frequent alternation between English, French, and Arabic represents an unspoken negotiation between authority and accessibility. This negotiation reveals the human dimension of pedagogy—the teacher's attempt to balance institutional ideals with students' actual linguistic and cognitive realities.

Teacher agency emerged as a decisive factor in mediating these tensions. Without a standardized textbook, the instructor's reliance on the national Scope and Sequence framework required constant decision-making about content, method, and linguistic accommodation. This freedom created both vulnerability and creativity. On one hand, the lack of institutional guidance placed the burden of design and adaptation entirely on the teacher; on the other, it allowed for contextualized pedagogy rooted in students' linguistic profiles and learning needs. Such agency demonstrates that pedagogical innovation does not necessarily depend on new policies or materials but can emerge from reflective adaptation within constraints.

The study also highlights how participation patterns are not neutral indicators of engagement but reflections of underlying linguistic hierarchies. The consistent group of active participants—roughly 40% of the class—represents students who have internalized the dominant linguistic capital of English. Their fluency provides access to visibility and validation, reinforcing the institutional discourse of excellence. In contrast, students who remain silent or hesitant often navigate internalized hierarchies that equate limited English proficiency with intellectual inadequacy. This dynamic calls for a more nuanced understanding

of participation as an ideological practice shaped by power relations embedded in language use.

From a broader perspective, the CPGE context encapsulates Morocco's ongoing negotiation between globalization and linguistic identity. English, promoted as a gateway to international opportunity, now competes with the established prestige of French and the cultural centrality of Arabic. Within this complex ecology, teachers become mediators of competing linguistic ideologies. Their choices—when to translate, when to insist on English, when to simplify or rephrase—carry symbolic weight that extends beyond the classroom. As this study shows, these micro-decisions are acts of policy in practice, shaping how students experience linguistic authority and self-worth.

The implications of these findings extend to both pedagogy and policy. For pedagogy, they underscore the importance of cultivating multilingual awareness in elite educational settings. Teachers in CPGE programs could benefit from professional development that emphasizes critical reflection on language ideology and strategies for managing multilingual interaction. Rather than viewing code-switching as a failure to maintain English, it can be reframed as a communicative strategy that enhances comprehension and inclusivity (Touhami & Jaafari, 2024b). Encouraging a more flexible linguistic approach would align with current research on translanguaging (García & Wei, 2014), which sees multilingualism as a resource rather than a problem.

For policy, the findings suggest that national frameworks such as the Scope and Sequence could be revised to include explicit guidance on managing multilingual classroom realities. While maintaining English as the target language remains important, acknowledging the pedagogical functions of French and Arabic could make instruction more equitable and authentic. Such policy adjustments would not diminish the role of English but rather position it within a more realistic understanding of Morocco's linguistic diversity. This approach would align elite education with broader national goals of inclusivity and social cohesion.

In addition, the study contributes to the literature on teacher agency in constrained contexts. The CPGE English teacher's ability to adapt, innovate, and sustain reflective practice despite structural limitations illustrates that agency is not the absence of constraint but the capacity to act meaningfully within it. This aligns with Priestley et al.'s (2015) view of agency as an ecological construct—shaped by professional knowledge, institutional affordances, and individual reflexivity. Supporting teacher agency through institutional recognition and collaboration could therefore strengthen pedagogical quality across CPGE programs nationwide.

Finally, the study invites reflection on the notion of excellence itself. In the CPGE context, excellence is often defined through linguistic mastery, particularly in English. Yet the findings suggest that excellence should also include adaptability, intercultural competence, and ethical communication. A classroom that values empathy and inclusion can produce graduates who are not only linguistically skilled but also critically aware of the power structures that language embodies. Redefining excellence in this way would better align Moroccan education with both local realities and global values of equity and understanding.

In conclusion, this case study demonstrates that the CPGE English classroom in Beni Mellal is more than an instructional space; it is a site of social negotiation where language, power, and identity intersect. While the institution reproduces certain hierarchies, it also provides opportunities for transformation through conscious pedagogical choices. The teacher's reflective engagement with multilingualism shows that even within elite systems, equity can be advanced through human-centered practices. Future research might expand on this work by exploring how similar dynamics unfold across other CPGE centers or by examining how students themselves conceptualize excellence and linguistic legitimacy. This case study suggests that meaningful change in Moroccan elite education may depend as much on classroom practice as on policy reform, particularly in contexts where teachers and students negotiate the meaning of language, knowledge, and belonging in everyday interaction.

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Authors' Bios

TOUHAMI Ahmed: Dr. TOUHAMI Ahmed is a professor of English at CPGE in Beni Mellal. He holds a PhD with distinction in Literature. His research and teaching interests span Diaspora Literature, Gender Studies, Education, Cultural Studies, and Media Studies, fields that intersect in their exploration of identity, representation, and social transformation. He is particularly interested in how literature and media construct and challenge cultural narratives, in ways that influence both individual and collective perceptions. Through his teaching, he always encourages critical engagement with texts, which bolsters analytical thinking and cross-cultural awareness in academic and social contexts.

Baghit Redouan: Dr. Baghit Redouan is a professor of English at CPGE in Rabat, Morocco, with international experience, including service as a Moroccan delegate to the United Kingdom. He holds a PhD with distinction in Applied Linguistics and focuses his research on English language teaching (TEFL, TESOL), language assessment, psychometrics, curriculum design, pedagogy, andragogy, syntax, oral communication skills, and research methodology. Dr. Redouan actively contributes to the scholarly community as an Editorial Review Board member for the International Journal of English Language and Literature (AESS Publications, Q1 Scopus-indexed) and the Asian Online Journal Publishing Group. ORCID: https://orcid.org/0009-0005-0624-1192