DISCURSIVELY CONSTRUCTING TEACHER ACCOUNTABILITY: A CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS OF EFL ASSESSMENT POLICIES AND TEACHER AGENCY

Arzeen Bhatti

MS Scholar, Applied linguistics, University of Management and Technology, Lahore, Pakistan.
Email Address: arzeenbhatti4@gmail.com

Shehneez Fiaz

M.Phil Scholar, Department of Applied Linguistics, Kinnaird College For Women, Lahore, Pakistan.
Email Address: ambivert56@gmail.com

Saadia Khan

PhD English Linguistics Scholar, Department of English, University of Education, Lahore, Pakistan.
Email Address: saadiakhanabdali@gmail.com

Abstract

In accountability-driven educational systems, assessment policies play a central role in regulating English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers' professional practices and institutional responsibilities. Although applied linguistics research has widely addressed assessment practices and their pedagogical effects, there remains a lack of critical inquiry into how assessment policies linguistically construct teacher accountability and shape professional agency. This qualitative study addresses this gap by employing Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to investigate the discursive representation of EFL teachers in assessment policy documents and teachers' interpretations of these representations. Drawing on Fairclough's three-dimensional framework, the study analyzes a corpus of national and institutional EFL assessment policy texts alongside semi-structured interviews with 8–12 EFL teachers from secondary and higher education contexts. The analysis examines textual features such as modality, evaluative language, and nominalization to uncover implicit power relations embedded in policy discourse. Teachers' narratives are analyzed to explore how these discourses are appropriated, negotiated, or resisted in classroom assessment practices. At the level of social practice, the study situates these discursive processes within broader accountability regimes in contemporary EFL education. The study is expected to demonstrate that assessment policies predominantly construct teachers as responsible for measurable outcomes, often limiting pedagogical autonomy, while teachers actively negotiate these discourses to maintain professional agency. The findings contribute to applied linguistics by highlighting the role of discourse in shaping assessment-related teacher identities and by offering implications for more equitable and context-sensitive assessment policy development.

Keywords: *Critical Discourse Analysis; EFL assessment policy; teacher accountability; teacher agency; applied linguistics; educational discourse; language policy*

1. Introduction

In recent decades, educational systems worldwide have increasingly adopted accountability-driven reforms, positioning assessment as a central mechanism for regulating teaching practices and institutional performance. Within English as a Foreign Language (EFL) education, assessment policies have expanded beyond pedagogical guidance to function as instruments of governance, surveillance, and control. These policies often articulate expectations

regarding learning outcomes, performance indicators, and standardized benchmarks, thereby shaping how teachers understand their professional responsibilities and identities (Ball, 2017; Darling-Hammond et al., 2020). While accountability frameworks are frequently justified through discourses of quality assurance and efficiency, critics argue that they may constrain teacher autonomy and reduce complex pedagogical practices to measurable outputs.

From a discourse-analytic perspective, policies do not merely prescribe actions; they actively construct social realities by positioning actors within particular roles and relations of power. Assessment policy texts, in this sense, function as powerful discursive artifacts that define what counts as legitimate knowledge, effective teaching, and professional competence. In EFL contexts, these constructions are particularly salient due to the global status of English and the persistent influence of international testing regimes and neoliberal educational ideologies (Shohamy, 2017; O'Regan, 2021). Consequently, teachers are often framed as accountable agents responsible for producing quantifiable learner outcomes, regardless of contextual constraints such as class size, learner diversity, or institutional resources.

Applied linguistics research has extensively examined classroom-based assessment practices, washback effects of testing, and teachers' assessment literacy. However, comparatively less attention has been paid to the discursive construction of accountability itself, especially as embedded in official policy documents. Critical scholars argue that ignoring the linguistic features of policy discourse risks naturalizing accountability as a neutral or inevitable educational condition, rather than recognizing it as an ideologically loaded construct (Fairclough, 2015; Johnson & Johnson, 2015). A critical discourse approach allows researchers to uncover how language choices—such as modality, nominalization, and evaluative lexis—implicitly assign responsibility, authority, and blame.

Teacher agency, understood as teachers' capacity to act purposefully and reflectively within structural constraints, has emerged as a key concept in resisting overly technocratic models of accountability. Rather than passive recipients of policy mandates, teachers actively interpret, negotiate, and sometimes resist policy discourses in their everyday professional practices (Priestley et al., 2017; Tao & Gao, 2021). In EFL assessment contexts, agency is particularly relevant because teachers often mediate between standardized policy requirements and localized classroom realities. How teachers position themselves in relation to accountability discourses can therefore illuminate tensions between compliance and professional judgment.

Recent scholarship in applied linguistics has highlighted the importance of situating assessment within broader sociopolitical and cultural contexts. For example, studies on multicultural education and global awareness emphasize that language education policies are never culturally neutral but reflect dominant ideologies about language, identity, and power (Nadeem & Khan, 2025). Similarly, research on Pakistani English and globalization demonstrates how local varieties of English and assessment norms are shaped by global discourses while simultaneously resisting linguistic homogenization (Khan & Irfan, 2025). These insights suggest that EFL assessment policies must be analyzed not only for their technical specifications but also for their ideological underpinnings.

Technological developments have further intensified accountability pressures in EFL assessment. The growing use of automated assessment tools, corpus-based evaluation, and natural language processing (NLP) has introduced new forms of datafication and surveillance into language education (Sajid et al., 2023). While such tools are often promoted as objective and efficient, critical scholars caution that they may reinforce narrow conceptions of language

proficiency and shift accountability disproportionately onto teachers for outcomes generated by algorithmic systems. These developments underscore the need for critical inquiry into how assessment policies frame responsibility in increasingly technologized educational environments.

Against this backdrop, Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) offers a robust theoretical and methodological framework for examining how accountability is discursively constructed in EFL assessment policies and how teachers engage with these constructions. Drawing on Fairclough's three-dimensional model, CDA enables analysis at the levels of textual features, discursive practices, and broader social structures (Fairclough, 2015). By integrating policy analysis with teachers' interpretive accounts, this study seeks to bridge the gap between macro-level policy discourse and micro-level professional agency within contemporary EFL education.

1.1 Research Objectives

1. To critically analyze how EFL assessment policies discursively construct teacher accountability through specific linguistic and rhetorical features.
2. To explore how EFL teachers interpret, negotiate, or resist these accountability discourses in relation to their professional agency and assessment practices.

1.2 Research Questions

1. How do EFL assessment policy documents linguistically construct teacher accountability?
2. How do EFL teachers interpret and respond to these discursive constructions in their assessment practices?

1.4 Problem Statement

Although accountability has become a defining feature of contemporary EFL assessment policies, little research has critically examined how such policies discursively construct teacher accountability and shape professional agency. Existing studies have largely emphasized assessment practices, outcomes, or technical competencies, often overlooking the ideological and linguistic mechanisms through which responsibility, authority, and compliance are embedded in policy texts. Moreover, teachers' perspectives on how these accountability discourses are interpreted, negotiated, or resisted in practice remain underexplored, particularly in EFL contexts influenced by global testing regimes and standardized evaluation frameworks. This gap limits understanding of the relationship between policy discourse and teacher agency, highlighting the need for a critical discourse analysis that integrates policy texts with teachers' interpretive experiences.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Accountability Regimes, Performativity and the Datafication of Teaching

Accountability reforms in many education systems increasingly position teachers as individually responsible for institutional performance indicators, often tied to standardized assessment outcomes and external evaluation metrics. Within these reforms, accountability is not only a governance mechanism but also a discourse that normalizes "measurability" as the primary sign of quality, shifting attention from pedagogy-as-practice to pedagogy-as-output. Holloway (2020) shows how contemporary accountability infrastructures depend on data evidence to define teacher effectiveness, thereby narrowing professional discretion through evaluation logics that privilege what can be quantified. This outcome-oriented governance is frequently accompanied by responsibilities—an ideological shift that frames systemic constraints as personal obligations and failures, intensifying teacher self-surveillance and compliance (Besley, 2019). In this environment, "good teaching" becomes increasingly synonymous with "demonstrable performance," producing

professional subjectivities aligned with performative expectations rather than contextualized educational purposes (Skerritt, 2018).

A related strand of scholarship demonstrates that accountability discourse operates as a psychological and moral technology, shaping how teachers narrate their work, justify decisions, and internalize blame for outcomes they only partially control. For instance, discourse-analytic work on teachers' narratives shows that neoliberal accountability can become an interpretive frame through which teachers evaluate themselves, emphasizing individual management and personal responsibility even when teachers explicitly critique the policy regime (Taylor, 2023). Such findings align with analyses of metric power in higher education and schooling, where data infrastructures reconfigure professional judgment into auditable traces and "evidence" becomes synonymous with numerical records (Williamson et al., 2020). Consequently, teacher agency is often re-routed into "strategic compliance," where teachers manage visibility and documentation to satisfy accountability demands, rather than pursue pedagogical goals rooted in learner needs and equity (Holloway, 2020; Taylor, 2023).

2.2 Language Assessment Policy, Critical Language Testing and Equity Concerns

Language assessment policy scholarship increasingly argues that assessment is never neutral: it is a social practice that distributes opportunities, legitimizes particular language norms, and reproduces institutional power relations. Within this tradition, critical language testing emphasizes how tests and assessment policies can reinforce inequality by treating linguistic performance as an objective measurement detached from social conditions and historical hierarchies (Shohamy, 2017). Related work in TESOL and applied linguistics demonstrates that accountability-linked testing regimes tend to privilege dominant varieties and standardized constructs, disadvantaging linguistically diverse learners and narrowing the curriculum to what is tested (Kremmel & Harding, 2020). Such critiques foreground fairness, transparency, and the ethics of decision-making—especially when assessment results are used for high-stakes judgments about teachers, schools, or student progression (Inbar-Lourie, 2017).

More recent contributions connect critical assessment scholarship to broader debates on social justice and multilingualism. For example, critical TESOL research emphasizes that equitable assessment requires scrutinizing how accountability reforms define "success," whose language practices count as legitimate, and how local classroom realities are erased by policy discourse that prioritizes uniform targets (García & Otheguy, 2020). This perspective is reinforced by work explicitly linking critical language testing to multilingualism and social justice, arguing that ethical assessment requires attention to power, ideology, and lived consequences—not only technical validity claims (Shohamy, 2017). Together, these studies support the premise that assessment policy can function as a language ideological project: it constructs norms and responsibilities while obscuring the political choices embedded in "standards" and "benchmarks" (Kremmel & Harding, 2020; Shohamy, 2017).

2.3 Critical Discourse Analysis and Critical Policy Discourse Analysis in Education Policy Research

CDA and CPDA scholarship provides analytical tools for examining how policy texts construct social realities through language, including the identities and responsibilities assigned to teachers. CPDA frameworks emphasize that policy meaning is produced through discourse—through lexical choices, grammatical patterns, and intertextual links that position some actors as authoritative and others as implementers (Rogers et al., 2022). In this view, policy is not merely a technical document but a discursive artifact that circulates ideologies, legitimizes governance

arrangements, and defines what counts as "good practice." Work focused on teacher education policy demonstrates how policy discourse can mobilize normative expectations about teachers' democratic roles, professionalism, and accountability by foregrounding certain values while backgrounding structural constraints (Simmie & Edling, 2018). These approaches are particularly relevant for accountability contexts because they illuminate how power operates through subtle textual mechanisms rather than explicit coercion.

Methodologically, CDA research commonly examines modality, evaluation, nominalization, and agent deletion to identify how policy language constructs obligations, certainty, and responsibility. For example, research on teacher education policy discourse highlights how seemingly neutral formulations can naturalize neoliberal imaginaries, positioning teachers as targets of reform and surveillance while presenting policy goals as common sense (Simmie & Edling, 2018). Complementing this, teacher-identity scholarship shows how policy eras characterized by market logics generate "preferred" professional identities that teachers are expected to inhabit, often through discourses of effectiveness and measurable impact (Skerritt, 2018). Together, CDA/CPDA work supports the argument that accountability is discursively produced: it becomes real not only through metrics and sanctions, but through language that frames teacher work as controllable, auditable, and individually accountable (Rogers et al., 2022; Skerritt, 2018).

2.4 Discursive Construction of Teacher Identity, Responsibility and Accountability

A growing body of research suggests that accountability policies operate as identity-making texts: they define teacher professionalism through categories such as effectiveness, performance, quality, and compliance. In performative policy contexts, teacher identity becomes tied to externally defined indicators, and professional worth is reconfigured as alignment with institutional targets rather than relational or contextual teaching goals. Skerritt (2018) demonstrates that business-like discourses in education can reshape how teachers make sense of themselves, encouraging subjectivities compatible with audit culture and performativity. Similarly, theorizing teacher responsibility under neoliberal accountability shows that "responsibility" shifts from collective, relational obligations (e.g., care and educational purpose) to individualized responsibilization, where teachers become moral agents tasked with solving structural problems through personal effort (Besley, 2019). These discourses can also normalize surveillance and self-monitoring as professional virtues, leading teachers to adopt evaluative language about themselves and their students consistent with accountability demands.

Importantly, identity construction is not simply imposed; it is negotiated through teachers' interpretations, emotional responses, and practical adaptations. Narrative and discourse studies show that teachers may critique accountability regimes while simultaneously adopting neoliberal frames (e.g., self-management, productivity) as interpretive resources for explaining stress, failure, or "not doing enough" (Taylor, 2023). At the same time, policy texts often use linguistic strategies—such as nominalization and agent deletion—that obscure the role of institutions and systems, thereby intensifying the impression that responsibility rests primarily with teachers (Rogers et al., 2022). This literature supports a central assumption of CDA-informed inquiry: accountability is accomplished through discourse that positions teachers as the key accountable subjects, while policy language can downplay the systemic conditions shaping assessment outcomes (Besley, 2019; Skerritt, 2018; Taylor, 2023).

2.5 Teacher Agency, Policy Enactment and Assessment Practices in EFL Contexts

While accountability discourses may constrain teacher autonomy, research consistently shows that teachers are not passive recipients of policy. Teacher agency scholarship highlights those teachers interpret, translate, and sometimes resist policy expectations in ways shaped by context, resources, and professional values. In assessment contexts, this becomes especially visible through washback studies that move beyond deterministic models of test influence. For example, Ali and Hamid (2023) demonstrate that even under strong exam-driven pressures and datafication, teachers can enact hybrid pedagogies—aligning some practices with exam demands while still pursuing broader curricular goals. This work reframes washback as mediated and negotiated, suggesting that assessment policies do not mechanically determine classroom practice; rather, teachers exercise agency within structural constraints (Ali & Hamid, 2023). Parallel research in EAP reform contexts indicates that teacher assessment literacy and local institutional realities shape how reforms are interpreted and enacted, often producing partial adoption, adaptation, or selective implementation (Tao & Gao, 2017).

A second theme concerns how agency relates to assessment literacy: to negotiate policy, teachers need interpretive resources, assessment knowledge, and professional confidence. Contemporary work on language assessment literacy proposes expanded models that include sociocultural and ethical dimensions (Abrar-ul-Hassan & Nassaji, 2023), emphasizing that teachers' capacities involve not only technical skill but also critical awareness of fairness, power, and consequences. Empirical modeling work further supports that assessment literacy varies across stakeholder groups and influences how teachers understand validity, scoring, and accountability expectations in practice (Kremmel, 2020). Together, these studies justify examining teacher narratives alongside policy texts: agency is exercised discursively (through how teachers talk about policy and justify practice) and materially (through how they implement assessment in constrained settings) (Abrar-ul-Hassan & Nassaji, 2023; Ali & Hamid, 2023; Tao & Gao, 2017).

2.6 Digital Assessment, NLP/AWE and New Accountability Pressures in Language Education

A rapidly developing literature examines how digital assessment tools—especially automated writing evaluation (AWE) and NLP-driven feedback—reshape assessment practices, teacher roles, and accountability expectations. Studies in language education show that AWE systems can increase efficiency and provide immediate feedback, but they also introduce new forms of surveillance and standardization through algorithmic scoring, dashboards, and trace data. Research on teachers in AWE-supported writing classes highlights that teachers' perceptions and implementation choices strongly mediate tool impact; teachers may use AWE strategically, supplement it with human feedback, or resist algorithmic judgments they see as misaligned with learner needs (Li et al., 2021). Systematic reviews similarly caution that AWE effectiveness depends on pedagogical integration, teacher mediation, and critical awareness of tool limitations (Li & He, 2022). These findings matter for accountability research because digital assessment infrastructures often amplify measurability—making performance more visible, comparable, and auditable.

Recent regional work strengthens this point by explicitly linking NLP approaches to writing assessment improvement, thereby expanding the assessment-policy landscape to include computational discourse about "objectivity," "precision," and "optimization." For instance, Sajid et al. (2025) report a corpus-based NLP framework for enhancing L2 writing assessment (e.g., coherence and cohesion), illustrating how computational approaches increasingly enter assessment

discourse and may influence institutional expectations for standardized outcomes. Similarly, corpus-driven studies using POS tagging and dependency parsing position automated analysis as a pathway to measuring complexity and proficiency, potentially reinforcing accountability logics that privilege quantifiable indicators (Menahil & Khan, 2025). These developments suggest that accountability in EFL assessment is no longer solely policy-text driven; it is increasingly co-produced by technological discourses that promise scalable evaluation, thereby raising new questions about teacher agency, interpretability, and the politics of "automated evidence" (Li et al., 2021; Sajid et al., 2025).

3. Research Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative research design grounded in Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to investigate how teacher accountability is discursively constructed in EFL assessment policies and how teachers interpret and negotiate these constructions. A qualitative approach is appropriate because the study seeks to examine meanings, ideologies, and power relations embedded in language rather than to measure variables quantitatively. CDA is particularly suited to this inquiry as it enables systematic analysis of policy texts while simultaneously accounting for the social and institutional contexts in which such texts are produced and interpreted (Fairclough, 2015). The design integrates document analysis of EFL assessment policy texts with semi-structured interviews conducted with EFL teachers, allowing triangulation between official discourse and lived professional experiences.

The study follows an interpretive–critical paradigm, which assumes that policy meanings are not fixed but are socially constructed and contested. By combining textual analysis with teachers' narratives, the research captures both the macro-level discursive structures of accountability and the micro-level enactment of these discourses in classroom assessment practices. This design aligns with previous CDA-informed studies in education policy that emphasize the importance of linking discourse analysis with practitioner perspectives to understand policy enactment and agency (Rogers et al., 2022).

3.2 Theoretical Framework

The study is theoretically grounded in Fairclough's three-dimensional model of Critical Discourse Analysis, originally developed by Norman Fairclough (1995) and further elaborated in later works (Fairclough, 2015). This framework conceptualizes discourse as simultaneously constituting (a) text, (b) discursive practice, and (c) social practice. At the textual level, the analysis focuses on linguistic features such as modality, evaluative language, nominalization, and agency deletion to examine how accountability and responsibility are encoded in assessment policy texts. At the level of discursive practice, the study explores how policy texts are produced, circulated, and interpreted, particularly through teachers' narratives and professional sense-making.

At the level of social practice, Fairclough's framework enables situating policy discourse within broader accountability regimes, neoliberal governance structures, and globalized EFL assessment norms. This level of analysis is critical for understanding how seemingly technical assessment policies reproduce ideological assumptions about efficiency, standardization, and teacher responsibility. The framework has been widely applied in educational policy research and is particularly effective for examining how power relations and professional identities are constructed through language (Simmie & Edling, 2018). By applying Fairclough's model, the study systematically links linguistic analysis to questions of teacher agency and institutional accountability.

3.3 Sampling Technique and Size

The study employs purposive sampling to select participants and documents that are information-rich and directly relevant to the research objectives. Policy documents are selected based on their relevance to EFL assessment at national and institutional levels, including curriculum guidelines, assessment frameworks, and official evaluation policies. These documents are chosen because they explicitly articulate expectations regarding assessment practices, teacher responsibility, and learner outcomes.

For the interview component, 8–12 EFL teachers from secondary and higher education contexts are recruited. Participants are selected based on their active involvement in assessment practices and their experience with policy-mandated assessment requirements. This sample size is consistent with qualitative CDA studies that prioritize depth of analysis over statistical generalizability (Tao & Gao, 2017). The inclusion of teachers from different institutional contexts allows for comparative insights into how accountability discourse is enacted across educational levels.

3.4 Instruments

Two primary instruments are used for data collection: policy documents and semi-structured interview protocols. The policy corpus consists of officially published EFL assessment documents obtained from educational authorities and institutional sources. These texts serve as the primary data for analyzing the discursive construction of teacher accountability.

The interview protocol is designed to elicit teachers' interpretations of assessment policies, perceptions of accountability, and experiences of negotiating policy demands in classroom practice. Semi-structured interviews allow flexibility for participants to elaborate on issues they consider significant while ensuring alignment with the study's analytical focus. Interview questions are informed by CDA principles and previous research on teacher agency and assessment literacy (Abrar-ul-Hassan & Nassaji, 2023). All interviews are audio-recorded with participant consent and transcribed verbatim for analysis.

3.5 Data Analysis

Data analysis follows Fairclough's three-stage CDA procedure. First, textual analysis is conducted on policy documents to identify key linguistic features that construct accountability, such as modal verbs (e.g., must, should), evaluative adjectives, and nominalized processes that obscure agency. Second, discursive practice analysis examines how teachers interpret and reproduce policy discourse in their narratives, focusing on patterns of acceptance, negotiation, and resistance. This stage involves thematic coding of interview transcripts, with attention to how teachers position themselves in relation to policy expectations.

Third, **social practice analysis** situates these findings within broader accountability regimes in EFL education, including standardization, datafication, and technologized assessment practices. The analysis is iterative and reflexive, moving between data, theory, and interpretation to ensure analytical rigor. NVivo or similar qualitative analysis software may be used to support systematic coding and data management, although interpretive decisions remain theory-driven.

3.6 Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval is obtained prior to data collection, and all research procedures adhere to established ethical guidelines for qualitative research. Participants are provided with informed consent forms outlining the purpose of the study, data usage, and their right to withdraw at any stage without penalty. To ensure confidentiality, pseudonyms are used for all participants, and identifying institutional details are anonymized.

Data are securely stored, and access is restricted to the researcher. Given the critical nature of the study and its focus on policy and accountability, particular care is taken to avoid professional risk to participants. Interview questions are framed to encourage reflection rather than evaluation, and findings are reported in ways that emphasize systemic patterns rather than individual shortcomings. This ethical approach aligns with best practices in CDA and teacher-focused qualitative research (Rogers et al., 2022).

4. Results and Findings

4.1 Discursive Construction of Teacher Responsibility through Modality

Analysis of EFL assessment policy texts reveals that modality is a primary linguistic resource used to construct teacher accountability. Policy documents frequently employ high-obligation modal verbs such as *must*, *are required to*, and *shall*, which position teachers as unequivocally responsible for assessment outcomes and compliance with standardized procedures. These modal choices reduce space for professional discretion and present assessment practices as non-negotiable obligations rather than context-sensitive pedagogical decisions. Teachers are discursively framed as implementers of predetermined standards, reinforcing a top-down accountability structure.

Interview data indicate that teachers are acutely aware of these modal constructions and often interpret them as institutional pressure. Several participants reported feeling constrained by prescriptive language, noting that such formulations limit their ability to adapt assessment practices to learner needs. However, some teachers described selectively reinterpreting modal obligations in practice, particularly in formative assessment contexts, suggesting that agency is exercised through pragmatic adaptation rather than overt resistance.

Table 1

Modal Constructions of Teacher Responsibility in EFL Assessment Policies

Modal Formulation	Discursive Function	Implied Accountability
"Teachers must ensure…"	High obligation	Individual responsibility
"Assessment shall be aligned…"	Institutional mandate	Compliance-oriented
"Teachers are required to…"	Prescriptive instruction	Auditability

Note. Modal verbs function to naturalize accountability by framing assessment practices as mandatory and non-negotiable.

4.2 Nominalization and the Obscuring of Institutional Agency

A prominent finding is the extensive use of nominalization in policy texts, where processes such as *evaluation*, *monitoring*, and *quality assurance* are presented as abstract entities rather than actions performed by specific institutional actors. This linguistic strategy obscures who is responsible for designing, enforcing, or evaluating assessment systems, while simultaneously foregrounding teachers as the visible agents accountable for outcomes.

Teachers' narratives reflect this discursive asymmetry. Participants frequently referred to "the system" or "the policy" as an impersonal force, expressing uncertainty about decision-making authority while still feeling personally accountable for results. This pattern suggests that nominalization contributes to a redistribution of responsibility, shifting accountability downward while rendering institutional power less visible.

Table 2

Nominalized Processes in Assessment Policy Discourse

Nominalized Term	Hidden Actor	Discursive Effect
"Monitoring of assessment"	Authorities	Depersonalization
"Quality assurance mechanisms"	Institutions	Naturalization
"Standardization of outcomes"	Policy designers	Responsibility shift

Note. Nominalization minimizes institutional accountability while intensifying teacher responsibilities.

4.3 Evaluative Language and the Construction of the "Effective" Teacher

Policy documents consistently employ evaluative adjectives such as *effective*, *efficient*, *consistent*, and *objective* to describe desirable assessment practices and teacher performance. These evaluative terms construct an idealized image of the "effective" teacher who reliably produces measurable outcomes aligned with policy benchmarks. Importantly, such evaluations are rarely defined in pedagogical terms, instead emphasizing alignment, consistency, and comparability.

Teachers reported ambivalence toward these evaluative discourses. While some acknowledged the value of clarity and consistency, many expressed concerns that such criteria prioritize compliance over pedagogical responsiveness. Several teachers described tension between being seen as "effective" according to policy metrics and addressing diverse learner needs, highlighting the discursive conflict between evaluation and educational care.

Table 3

Evaluative Language in EFL Assessment Policy Texts

Evaluative Term	Associated Value	Professional Implication
Effective	Measurable outcomes	Performance orientation
Consistent	Standard alignment	Reduced flexibility
Objective	Neutrality	Decontextualization

Note. Evaluative language constructs professionalism in technocratic and outcome-driven terms.

4.4 Teacher Negotiation and Strategic Agency in Assessment Practices

Despite the constraining discursive environment, interview findings demonstrate that teachers actively negotiate accountability discourses. Rather than outright resistance, teachers commonly adopt strategies of selective compliance, meeting formal policy requirements while informally adapting assessment practices to support learning. This negotiation often occurs in formative assessment, feedback provision, and grading flexibility.

Teachers' narratives reveal agentive repositioning, where accountability is reframed as responsibility toward learners rather than solely toward institutional metrics. Such discursive shifts allow teachers to maintain a sense of professional integrity while operating within accountability constraints. These findings underscore that agency is exercised relationally and discursively, even in highly regulated contexts.

Table 4

Forms of Teacher Agency in Accountability Contexts

Strategy	Description	Agency Orientation
Selective compliance	Meeting minimum policy requirements	Pragmatic

Strategy	Description	Agency Orientation
Pedagogical adaptation	Modifying tasks informally	Learner-centered
Discursive reframing	Redefining accountability	Professional ethics

Note. Teacher agency is enacted through negotiation rather than direct opposition.

4.5 Accountability Discourses within Broader Social and Technological Practices

At the level of social practice, accountability discourse in EFL assessment is embedded within broader regimes of standardization, datafication, and technologization. Policy texts increasingly reference digital platforms, performance data, and evidence-based evaluation, aligning assessment with managerial and technological rationalities. These discourses reinforce expectations of traceability and auditability, further intensifying teacher accountability.

Teachers expressed mixed responses to these developments. While acknowledging the efficiency of digital tools, many raised concerns about increased surveillance and reduced professional judgment. This tension illustrates how accountability is co-produced by policy language and technological infrastructures, reshaping teacher roles in contemporary EFL education.

Table **5**

Social and Technological Dimensions of Accountability Discourse

Dimension	Policy Emphasis	Teacher Perception
Datafication	Evidence-based assessment	Surveillance
Digitalization	Efficiency and tracking	Reduced autonomy
Standardization	Comparability	Context loss

Note. Accountability operates at the intersection of policy discourse and technological governance.

5. Discussion

The findings of this study demonstrate that EFL assessment policies function not merely as technical guidelines but as discursive instruments that construct teacher accountability through specific linguistic strategies. The pervasive use of high-obligation modality in policy texts confirms earlier research showing that accountability regimes rely on prescriptive language to normalize compliance and reduce pedagogical discretion (Ball, 2017; Holloway, 2020). By framing assessment responsibilities as mandatory and non-negotiable, policies position teachers as the primary agents responsible for learner outcomes, reinforcing performative expectations. This discursive construction aligns with neoliberal governance models in education, where professional work is increasingly evaluated through measurable outputs rather than relational or contextual pedagogical processes (Williamson et al., 2020).

The extensive use of nominalization observed in the policy texts further contributes to the unequal distribution of responsibility identified in the findings. By presenting processes such as "quality assurance" and "monitoring" as abstract entities, policy discourse obscures institutional agency while intensifying teacher responsibilities. This finding supports critical policy discourse research demonstrating that agent deletion and depersonalization are key mechanisms through which power is exercised in educational policy (Rogers et al., 2022; Simmie & Edling, 2018). As a result, accountability becomes individualized, and systemic constraints—such as curriculum design, resource allocation, or institutional decision-making—are rendered linguistically invisible.

Evaluative language in EFL assessment policies plays a central role in shaping teacher identity by constructing an idealized image of the "effective" teacher. The emphasis on

effectiveness, consistency, and objectivity reflects a technocratic conception of professionalism that privileges standardization and comparability over pedagogical judgment. This finding resonates with Skerritt's (2018) argument that business-oriented discourses redefine teacher professionalism in performative terms. Teachers' ambivalent responses to evaluative criteria highlight the tension between policy-defined effectiveness and teachers' ethical commitments to learner-centered assessment, particularly in linguistically and culturally diverse EFL classrooms.

Importantly, the study also reveals that teachers are not passive recipients of accountability discourse. Consistent with research on teacher agency and policy enactment, participants demonstrated strategic and discursive forms of agency, particularly through selective compliance and pedagogical adaptation (Tao & Gao, 2017; Ali & Hamid, 2023). Rather than openly resisting policy mandates, teachers negotiated accountability expectations by reframing responsibility toward students and learning processes. This finding underscores the relational nature of agency, suggesting that teacher autonomy persists even within tightly regulated assessment regimes, though often in constrained and informal ways.

The discussion further highlights how accountability discourse is increasingly intertwined with technological developments in language assessment. References to digital platforms, data tracking, and evidence-based evaluation reflect broader trends in the datafication of education (Williamson et al., 2020). Teachers' concerns about surveillance and reduced professional judgment echo critical research on automated and technology-mediated assessment, which cautions that algorithmic systems may reinforce narrow definitions of proficiency and accountability (Li et al., 2021; Sajid et al., 2025). These findings suggest that accountability pressures are amplified when policy discourse aligns with technological rationalities that prioritize efficiency and standardization.

Finally, the study's findings must be understood within the broader sociopolitical context of globalized EFL education. Accountability discourses are shaped by international assessment norms, global English ideologies, and market-oriented education reforms that transcend national boundaries. Research on multilingualism, globalization, and English language policy highlights how such discourses can marginalize local practices and teacher expertise (Shohamy, 2017; Khan & Irfan, 2023; Nadeem & Khan, 2025). By situating policy discourse within these global accountability regimes, the study contributes to applied linguistics by demonstrating how teacher accountability and agency are discursively negotiated at the intersection of language policy, assessment, and professional identity.

6. Conclusion

This study set out to critically examine how EFL assessment policies discursively construct teacher accountability and how teachers interpret and negotiate these constructions in their professional practices. Drawing on Critical Discourse Analysis and Fairclough's three-dimensional framework, the analysis demonstrated that accountability is not merely an administrative requirement but a discursively produced phenomenon embedded in policy language. Through linguistic features such as modality, nominalization, and evaluative lexis, assessment policies position teachers as primarily responsible for achieving measurable outcomes, often minimizing institutional accountability and contextual constraints.

The findings further reveal that accountability discourse shapes teacher identity by promoting a technocratic and performative conception of professionalism. Policy representations of the "effective" teacher emphasize consistency, objectivity, and alignment with standardized benchmarks, which can conflict with teachers' pedagogical values and ethical commitments to

learner-centered assessment. This tension underscores the ideological nature of assessment policies and highlights the risks of reducing complex educational practices to quantifiable indicators within accountability-driven systems.

At the same time, the study demonstrates that EFL teachers exercise agency in meaningful, though often constrained, ways. Teachers actively interpret, negotiate, and adapt accountability demands through selective compliance, pedagogical flexibility, and discursive reframing of responsibility toward learners. These findings challenge deficit-oriented views of teachers as passive policy implementers and instead foreground their role as reflective professionals navigating competing demands within institutional and policy structures.

In conclusion, this study contributes to applied linguistics and language assessment research by illuminating the discursive mechanisms through which accountability is constructed and enacted in EFL education. By integrating policy text analysis with teachers' narratives, the study offers a more nuanced understanding of the relationship between assessment policy, power, and teacher agency. The findings suggest the need for more equitable and context-sensitive assessment policies that recognize teacher expertise, support professional autonomy, and balance accountability with pedagogical integrity in increasingly globalized and technologized EFL contexts.

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