

# A Vocabulary of Resistance During Political Crises in the Northwest Region of Cameroon: Should Teachers Stay Quiet?

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## ABSTRACT

This study investigates the discursive strategies employed by teachers in the Northwest Region of Cameroon during the ongoing Anglophone political crisis, focusing on the subtle and strategic use of language to achieve both professional and civic demands. Drawing on Critical Pedagogy (Freire, 2000), Critical Discourse Analysis (Fairclough, 1995), and Systemic Functional Linguistics (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014), the research examines how educators navigate ideological pressure from both state and non-state actors while maintaining professional integrity and personal safety. Data was gathered through semi-structured interviews with teachers and classroom observations across affected areas. Findings reveal that teachers employed a "vocabulary of resistance" consisting of coded language, passive constructions, irony, polysemic texts, and even strategic silence, all designed to provoke critical thinking without overt confrontation. Teachers balanced critique of state propaganda and separatist coercion, highlighting their double marginalization and linguistic ingenuity. These discursive practices reflect not disengagement, but what Bourdieu (1991) describes as strategic censorship, a response to surveillance and power asymmetries. The study recommends strengthening teacher support networks, integrating peace education into curricula, and providing training in conflict-sensitive pedagogy. By acknowledging the role of language in navigating oppression, the paper calls for broader recognition of educators not merely as conveyors of content, but as active participants in the socio-political life of their communities.

**Keywords:** Classroom language, critical pedagogy, teacher ethics, Critical discourse, resistance discourse, teacher agency.

## INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

The Northwest Region of Cameroon has, for nearly a decade, been engulfed in a political and humanitarian crisis commonly referred to as the Anglophone Crisis. Rooted in decades of perceived marginalization and linguistic-cultural discrimination against English-speaking Cameroonians, the conflict has resulted in widespread violence, displacement, and social disruption (ICG 2017). In the midst of this volatile landscape, education has become both a battleground and a potential space for peacebuilding (ICG 2017, Bang and Balgah 2022). Schools have been targeted, teachers threatened or kidnapped, and students denied consistent access to learning. Yet beyond these overt attacks on education lies a more subtle but equally powerful phenomenon: the linguistic choices teachers make in the classroom and within their professional communities during times of unrest.

Language is never neutral. In politically charged contexts, even silence can carry ideological weight (Freire, 2000). For teachers who are often expected to model civic virtue, neutrality, and discipline their words or silences during political crises can become acts of resistance or compliance. Critical Pedagogy, as articulated by Paulo Freire and others, challenges the notion of apolitical teaching, arguing instead that education is inherently political and that teachers have a moral responsibility to engage learners in critical reflection about their realities (Giroux, 1988). Within this framework, educators are viewed not merely as conveyors of

knowledge, but as agents of social transformation. Yet in conflict zones such as the Northwest Region of Cameroon, the stakes of such engagement are high, with real risks to personal safety, job security, and community standing (Tabulawa, 2013).

In his chapter *Contextual Complexities and Second Language Acquisition in Cameroon*, Mbibeh (2023) emphasizes that traditional theories of second language acquisition often fail to capture the unique sociopolitical and multilingual realities of Cameroon. This is particularly evident in crisis-affected regions like the Northwest, where language use is deeply intertwined with identity, power, and resistance. Teachers, navigating a precarious educational environment, often employ a hybrid linguistic repertoire not just for instruction, but as a means of socio-political negotiation. By acknowledging these contextual complexities, this study builds on Mbibeh's assertion that SLA in Cameroon must be re-evaluated through a localized, conflict-aware lens especially when analysing how English is used not merely as a medium of instruction but as a tool of resistance and survival.

Despite the central role that language plays in shaping political consciousness, little scholarly attention has been paid to the ways in which Cameroonian teachers negotiate discursive resistance under threat. This study therefore seeks to investigate the vocabulary of resistance employed by teachers whether in the form of coded language, satire, storytelling, or silence and how such strategies reflect broader tensions between professional duty, personal ethics, and civic responsibility. By examining the intersection of language, power, and pedagogy during political conflict, the study contributes to emerging conversations about the ethics of teaching, the role of discourse in resistance, and the place of educators in movements for justice and peace (Achugar, 2009; Motsamai & Dewaele, 2021). Furthermore, the study draws on local context, as language and identity politics have always been deeply intertwined in Cameroon's educational system (Nyamnjoh, 2005). Tabulawa (2013) argues that critical pedagogy offers a transformative lens for teachers operating in politically sensitive contexts, suggesting that their language choices can either disrupt or reinforce dominant power structures. This work will also contribute to a growing body of research examining how educators in conflict zones can resist hegemonic power through subtle yet meaningful forms of discourse (Apple, 2004; Nkwetisama, 2021).

### **Statement of the Problem**

The Anglophone Crisis in Cameroon has escalated into a prolonged political and humanitarian conflict, deeply affecting various sectors, including education. (ICG 2017) Teachers, who are traditionally seen as neutral figures in society, find themselves at the centre of this crisis, caught between their professional responsibilities and the political tensions that surround them. The role of teachers in such a context raises crucial questions about their ethical responsibility, the linguistic choices they make, and their positioning within the wider political landscape. Should teachers remain silent, maintaining neutrality, or should they speak out, potentially becoming targets of political and societal backlash?

While much has been written about political resistance movements and their actors, little scholarly attention has been directed at the linguistic forms of resistance used by teachers in conflict zones. In times of political unrest, language becomes a powerful tool not only for transmitting information but also for shaping political identities, power relations, and public perceptions. Teachers, in particular, possess a unique position within their communities; they are not just educators but also cultural agents capable of influencing the social and political landscape through the words they choose to use in the classroom and beyond. However, there is limited research on the ways in which teachers in Cameroon navigate the challenges of using language as a form of resistance without risking personal safety or professional consequences. The problem, therefore, lies in understanding how teachers in the Northwest Region of Cameroon negotiate their speech during politically sensitive times. What linguistic strategies do they employ, consciously or unconsciously, to resist political oppression while adhering to the ethical demands of their profession? Are these strategies overt or subtle, and how do they impact both teachers and students? Furthermore, to what extent do these linguistic choices reflect broader political dynamics, and how do teachers balance their roles as educators with their personal political stances in a society deeply divided along linguistic and political lines?

Addressing these questions will shed light on the role of teachers as agents of change and resistance, offering valuable insights into how language operates within politically charged educational settings. It will also contribute to the broader discourse on Critical Pedagogy by examining how educators can engage with students and communities in conflict zones, fostering critical awareness without compromising their safety or professional integrity.

## METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a qualitative research design to explore how teachers in the Northwest Region of Cameroon use language during the ongoing political crisis. The research aimed to understand how language functions as a tool for navigating political tensions and exercising agency in conflict zones. The methodology is grounded in a combination of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), Critical Pedagogy, and Ethnographic Methods, allowing for a detailed examination of how teachers' discourse reflected their political stances and ethical positions in a highly charged political environment.

### Data Collection

The research employed several data collection techniques to ensure a rich, nuanced understanding of the linguistic practices of teachers:

1. **Interviews:** Semi-structured interviews were conducted with a range of teachers from different educational levels in the Northwest Region. These interviews explored teachers' perspectives on the political crisis, the ethical dilemmas they faced, and the ways in which their language reflected their stance on the conflict. The interviews also probed into the extent to which teachers used language to either resist or comply with political pressures, with specific attention given to moments of crisis and classroom discourse. Participants included both experienced and novice teachers, enabling a comparison of generational differences in attitudes and practices.
2. **Classroom Observations:** Observations were conducted in schools within the region, focusing on the language used by teachers in their day-to-day teaching practices. The goal was to capture both overt and subtle forms of resistance in classroom interactions, including verbal and non-verbal expressions. Teachers' use of metaphors, sarcasm, irony, and silence in the classroom was closely examined to identify how these strategies contributed to or resisted the dominant political discourse.
3. **Document Analysis:** The study also analysed lesson plans, educational materials, and school communications (such as newsletters or circulars) produced by teachers during the period of the crisis. These documents were examined to identify patterns of resistance and compliance in the vocabulary used. Special attention was given to the ways in which political issues were framed, either implicitly or explicitly, in educational contexts.

### Data Analysis

The collected data was analysed using a combination of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), Critical Pedagogy, and Ethnographic Coding.

1. **Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA):** CDA was used to analyse the linguistic choices made by teachers during interviews, observations, and classroom interactions. It helped identify how language functioned as a tool of power, control, and resistance, and how teachers challenged or reinforced political ideologies. Specific attention was given to the identification of key themes such as silence, metaphor, coded language, and resistance, drawing on the works of Fairclough (2013) and van Dijk (2008) for theoretical grounding.
2. **Ethnographic Coding:** The observations and interview transcripts were coded ethnographically to uncover patterns in the ways teachers discussed and practiced resistance. This involved identifying recurring themes in teachers' reflections on their use of language, both within the classroom and in their wider social interactions. Ethnographic coding allowed for a deep exploration of the social and cultural

context in which teachers operated, providing insight into how language was shaped by and in turn shaped the political realities of the Northwest Region of Cameroon.

3. **Critical Pedagogy Framework:** The findings were also analysed through the lens of Critical Pedagogy, particularly focusing on how teachers used their platform to engage students critically with political issues. The study examined whether and how teachers encouraged students to question authority, challenge dominant political narratives, and reflect critically on their role in the socio-political landscape. The theoretical underpinnings of Freire's (2000) *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* and Giroux's (2024) work on teachers as intellectuals were used to interpret teachers' actions as agents of social transformation or compliance.

## Ethical Considerations

This study adhered to strict ethical guidelines to ensure the safety and confidentiality of participants. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, with clear explanations of the study's objectives and potential risks. Given the sensitive nature of the research, participants were assured that they could withdraw at any time without penalty. Pseudonyms were used in reporting findings to protect the identities of both participants and schools. Additionally, ethical concerns related to political sensitivity were addressed by ensuring that no participant was coerced into sharing information that could place them at risk.

## Data Analysis

This section presents a detailed analysis of the data collected from semi-structured interviews and classroom observations conducted with teachers operating within the conflict-ridden Northwest Region of Cameroon. The analysis is grounded in Critical Pedagogy and Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), both of which help unpack the ideological implications of the teachers' language use. Drawing on the principles of Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL), the study also interrogates how linguistic structures reflect and reinforce social and power relations in times of political unrest. Particular attention is given to how teachers use language to navigate the complex and often contradictory demands of professional duty, personal safety, and political engagement. The data reveals varied discursive strategies employed by teachers ranging from direct critique and satire to silence and metaphor to resist, negotiate, or comply with dominant narratives imposed by both state and non-state actors in the conflict. This section, therefore presents the multifaceted vocabulary of resistance adopted by educators, highlighting the nuanced ways in which language becomes both a shield and a weapon in the hands of those caught between pedagogy and politics.

## How Teachers Use Language as a Form of Resistance

The data collected from semi-structured interviews with teachers reveal that many educators in the Northwest Region of Cameroon employ what can be termed a "coded discourse of resistance" in the classroom. This includes the use of metaphors, allegorical stories, silence, and ironic references to authority linguistic tools that allow teachers to critique socio-political structures without overtly placing themselves at risk. For instance, one teacher narrated how they frequently refer to "the days of Pharaoh" or "Babylon" when teaching literature or history a metaphorical allusion that students interpret as referencing state oppression. This subtle critique mirrors what Achugar (2016) described as "intergenerational encoding" where language becomes a repository for alternative historical narratives.

From a Critical Pedagogic standpoint, these strategies align with Freire's (2000) insistence on education as a dialogic process in which the oppressed critically reflect on their realities. Teachers here are not merely evading repression; they are crafting spaces for what Giroux (2024) calls "border pedagogy", teaching that operates on the margins of official discourse, cultivating awareness without overt insubordination.

Silence also emerged as a powerful communicative strategy. Teachers reported moments when they deliberately remained silent or "let students talk" when controversial political themes emerged. For instance,



sensitive discussions like someone killed or kidnapped with militias claiming to have executed the act is difficult to talk about without taking sides or putting yourself at risk as one respondent explained, it is better to allow the students talk about it with little or not commentary apart from giving the parole. This echoes Fairclough's (2023) assertion that silence is not the absence of language, but a discursive act loaded with meaning. In contexts of political volatility, silence was noticed to have often spoken volumes signalling discomfort, dissent, or a refusal to legitimize dominant ideologies.

### **How Teachers Respond Discursively to Both State and Non-State Actors in the Conflict**

The linguistic behaviour of teachers interviewed for this study revealed a deeply layered and cautious form of discursive navigation. Teachers were not simply resisting or supporting one side over the other, they were actively negotiating a precarious balance between state-imposed expectations and the often-violent pressures from non-state actors, particularly separatist groups.

In relation to the state, many teachers described engaging in coded critiques of the government's failure to ensure safety and sustained educational access in the conflict-stricken Northwest Region. Due to the repressive environment and fear of reprisal, outright condemnation of state actions was rare. Instead, teachers often employed subtle linguistic strategies or what can be termed as "veiled resistance" to challenge official narratives while protecting their safety and professional standing. One teacher, for instance, noted during an interview, "We tell our learners that truth will always outlive noise." Though seemingly innocuous, this phrase carried significant subtext. According to the teacher, students understood it as an implicit reference to the persistent marginalization of Anglophone communities, despite the government's repeated declarations of peace and normalcy. Such utterances reflect what Fairclough (2013) conceptualizes as the "production of alternative knowledge systems," whereby individuals use language to subtly subvert dominant ideologies and offer counter-hegemonic interpretations of reality.

Other educators echoed similar sentiments, using proverbs, Biblical allusions, and metaphoric language to critique the state's role in the crisis without overtly naming it. These rhetorical choices not only shielded teachers from surveillance but also invited critical thinking among learners, encouraging them to read between the lines. For example, some teachers would refer to "the silence of justice" or "noise without light" to suggest the failure of state institutions to uphold equity or provide clarity. In doing so, they framed the classroom as a space of resistance, where linguistic creativity became a tool to expose contradictions in state rhetoric. This demonstrates how even within constrained settings, educators can exercise agency through discourse, contributing to a collective vocabulary of resistance that challenges dominant state-sponsored narratives.

However, teachers were equally critical of non-state actors. Participants frequently referenced the intimidation, threats, and enforcement of ghost towns by separatist militias. In classroom contexts, some teachers spoke of how they reframed the concept of freedom not as violent rejection of state authority, but as the capacity for independent critical thought. One teacher explained, "*We ask our learners: is freedom the same as fear?*" a powerful rhetorical question that subtly undermines both the coercion of state power and the authoritarianism of separatist groups. This renders a deep reflection on independent thinking which allows the students to decide for themselves what is actually the best dimension or perspective. Such discursive strategies embody Freire's (2000) vision of education as a space of conscientization, where individuals come to reflect critically on their situation. Teachers in this study engaged in what Giroux (2024) calls "pedagogical resistance" inviting learners to question all forms of domination, not only those imposed by the state or those forced through their throat by precarious situation of crises and by non-state armed groups

These reactions underscore the complex and often perilous position teachers occupy within the political crisis. What may be described as a form of double marginalization. On one hand, they are condemned or reprimanded by the state for perceived dissent or absenteeism, particularly when they fail to appear in classrooms during declared ghost towns or lockdowns. On the other hand, they are simultaneously threatened or attacked by separatist fighters who perceive them as agents or symbols of the state merely by continuing to work in public

institutions. This dual vulnerability places teachers in an impossible position, compelling them to navigate discourse with extreme caution.

In response to these conflicting pressures, teachers have developed a distinct vocabulary of resistance marked by strategic ambiguity. For instance, the phrase “those in big houses” is used as a euphemism for both political elites and separatist leaders intentionally blurring lines of culpability. Similarly, “black days” is a term commonly used to refer to ghost town days, encapsulating both the fear and loss associated with such moments while avoiding overt political alignment. Another evocative phrase that emerged in interviews was “speaking without speaking,” which captures the intentional vagueness teachers employ when addressing sensitive topics. These expressions reflect what can be described as a grammar of ambiguity meaning linguistic constructions that allow teachers to express critique, fear, or resistance without placing themselves directly in harm’s way. Such discursive tactics highlight not only the ingenuity of teachers under pressure, but also the profound limitations imposed on free expression in conflict zones. Through this encoded language, educators maintain a presence in the sociopolitical dialogue, while shielding themselves from direct confrontation with either side.

Additionally, non-verbal communication emerged as a significant mode of resistance among teachers navigating the political crisis. Many educators reported altering their dressing habits to avoid drawing attention to themselves or being identified as members of the teaching profession. For instance, instead of wearing formal attire, some opted for jeans trousers, t-shirts, or casual wear that would help them blend into the community and avoid being targeted by non-state actors. Others described the use of plastic bags instead of traditional teacher’s briefcases or satchels to carry materials to school as an attempt to disguise their professional identity while maintaining some degree of teaching presence. In extreme cases, some moved without books or materials altogether, choosing instead to rely on oral instruction to limit their visibility or obtain books only on school campus previously kept there.

Inside the classroom, symbolic decorations and subtle semiotic cues were deployed to express resistance or solidarity. Teachers mentioned the deliberate use of specific chalk colours such as red on certain politically charged days, signalling protest or mourning without uttering a word. Even body language was a tool of discourse: long, reflective pauses when political subjects arose, the use of sighs, lowered gaze, or the avoidance of eye contact were common strategies to communicate discomfort, dissent, or shared pain. These silent gestures created a covert language of protest, recognizable to students who shared the same sociopolitical awareness. As Fairclough (2023) argues, discourse is not limited to spoken or written language but includes all semiotic forms of communication that construct social reality. The teachers' embodied resistance through dress, gesture, and spatial movement therefore becomes part of a broader discursive practice that navigates, contests, and survives the power structures imposed by both state and non-state actors. This blend of verbal and non-verbal tactics illustrates the nuanced ways in which educators in conflict zones perform resistance while mitigating risk.

In summary, teachers did not respond monolithically to either side of the conflict. Rather than aligning fully with the state or non-state actors, their linguistic and discursive practices reflected a nuanced, contextually grounded strategy of survival and ethical engagement. This complexity reveals what can be described as *critical pragmatism* which is a discursive orientation that allowed teachers to navigate the shifting terrains of power, fear, and responsibility. Teachers consciously modulated their language to avoid overt political statements that might endanger their lives, yet many also found subtle ways to critique injustice, express solidarity with marginalized communities, or signal discontent with the status quo. Their speech acts were often layered with irony, coded metaphors, and allusions intelligible only to those familiar with the local context.

Rather than overt resistance, what emerged was a form of ethical balancing: a pedagogy of cautious speech and meaningful silence. For some, this meant maintaining professional obligations while subtly inserting lessons on peace, justice, and resilience into the curriculum. For others, it involved the use of allegorical

narratives or proverbs to awaken critical thought without triggering retribution. This form of communication aligns with Giroux's (2024) assertion that educators, even in restrictive environments, possess agency to "speak truth to power" in creatively subversive ways. Their resistance was not loud, but it was deeply intentional; an effort to preserve not only their physical safety, but also the moral integrity of their vocation.

Ultimately, these discursive strategies underscore the role of teachers as both intellectuals and front-line negotiators of social conflict. Their pedagogical actions were shaped by an acute awareness of their vulnerability, but also by a deep commitment to nurturing critical consciousness in their learners. In resisting both silence and reckless speech, these educators practiced a form of linguistic resistance rooted in care, caution, and courage.

### **How Teachers Conceptualize Their Professional and Ethical Role During Political Crisis?**

In politically volatile contexts such as the Northwest Region of Cameroon, the identity of the teacher becomes both a moral and discursive battlefield. Interviews and data from classroom interactions revealed that teachers saw themselves not only as knowledge facilitators, but as ethical agents and community anchors, navigating dangerous ideological terrain. From a critical pedagogy standpoint (Freire, 2000; Tabulawa, 2013), teachers repeatedly emphasized their responsibility to raise awareness without incitement, and to stimulate critical thinking without indoctrination. One teacher said, *"We are not here to dictate thoughts, but to guide them. Even silence must teach."* This highlights a tension central to Freire's model of dialogic education: the educator as both co-learner and moral guide.

For many, professional ethics meant avoiding partisan language yet not avoiding politics altogether. In fact, by embedding metaphors, allegories, and culturally coded phrases in lessons, teachers enacted a form of resistance that protected their learners and themselves. For instance, in teaching proverbs, one teacher used *"Even the cockroach has its side of the story,"* explaining it as a call for fairness; a subtle critique of one-sided political narratives promoted by state media.

Teachers also articulated concern for the psychosocial well-being of learners, especially those affected by violence or displacement. Some modified their curriculum to include lessons on empathy, conflict resolution, and historical interpretation, creating room for dialogic spaces that resisted both propaganda and apathy. This aligns with Giroux's (2024) emphasis on teachers as transformative intellectuals who shape students' ethical consciousness through discourse. Still, many felt constrained as seen in the fear of surveillance and reprisals from both state actors and separatist militias which led some to adopt what they called "neutral professionalism," defined not as political disengagement, but as strategic discourse. One respondent described it as *"saying enough to awaken, but not enough to endanger."* In this sense, neutrality is itself a rhetorical act, a calculated silence that carries moral weight (Giroux 2024).

As such, others adopted critical silence, deliberately leaving space for student reflection rather than direct commentary. In some cases, even the structure of lesson planning reflected subtle ethics, such as choosing topics that emphasized justice, fairness, or historical resistance movements (e.g., referencing the anti-colonial UPC struggles) without directly invoking the current conflict. This careful moral balancing act suggests that teachers in conflict zones perform a kind of pedagogical diplomacy a form of linguistic and ideological navigation that affirms human dignity while respecting the volatility of their environment. In essence, teachers viewed their ethical role not as abstaining from politics, but as modelling how to think politically without inciting violence. Through their discursive practices, they aligned with Freirean pedagogy's call for liberation through awareness and reflection, not manipulation or coercion.

### **The Vocabulary of Resistance: Lexical Strategies Used by Teachers During Crisis**

Language, as Fairclough (2013) argues, is not merely a tool for communication but a medium through which ideology is constructed, challenged, and reproduced. In politically sensitive contexts like the Northwest Region of Cameroon, teachers whether consciously or not employed a vocabulary of resistance marked by

coded, metaphorical, and ambivalent expressions. These lexical choices allowed them to navigate the risks posed by both state repression and non-state militant threats, while still engaging students in critical thought and civic reflection.

One common feature was the use of metaphors drawn from local proverbs and folklore, which served as a protective linguistic veil. For instance, expressions like *“Even the bird learns to fly when the wind is strong”* or *“The tree that stands alone bears the storm alone”* *“water na water- translated as water is water”* were used in classroom settings to reference survival, resistance, and the collective cost of silence without naming the conflict directly. Such metaphors allowed teachers to voice discontent or foster critical consciousness without triggering retaliation; a technique reminiscent of what Scott (1990) termed the “hidden transcript” in oppressed communities.

Another striking lexical and grammatical strategy identified in teachers’ discourse was the frequent employment of passive constructions and agentless verbs; a phenomenon thoroughly examined within the framework of Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL), particularly in the work of Halliday and Matthiessen (2014). In contexts where attribution of blame could lead to fatal consequences, many teachers strategically used forms of speech that obscured agency. For instance, rather than saying directly, “The military attacked the school,” which could be construed as subversive or accusatory, teachers often resorted to formulations such as “The school was affected” or “There was a disruption in learning.” These passive structures not only depersonalized the events but also carefully shielded the speaker from potential retribution, while still acknowledging that something harmful had occurred. This form of discursive ambiguity functioned as a linguistic shield. It enabled teachers to narrate or discuss traumatic experiences of burned school buildings, military raids, or community violence without identifying specific perpetrators. Such grammar choices reflect what Fairclough (2013) would classify as a form of ideological encoding, where structure and syntax carry political implications. By removing the agent, teachers implicitly addressed violence while maintaining a surface-level neutrality necessary for survival in a highly polarized environment.

Moreover, this technique underscores the nuanced role language plays in resistance and complicity. The avoidance of agency through grammar did not signal ignorance or denial; instead, it revealed a calculated linguistic manoeuvre grounded in a deep awareness of political surveillance, power asymmetries, and the dangers of speaking too plainly. In many interviews, teachers confessed that “everyone listens differently now and walls have ears,” a reference to the growing presence of informants and digital monitoring in both physical and online spaces. Thus, passive constructions became a vital discursive tool for negotiating danger. In this way, grammar itself became a site of struggle, and teachers demonstrated their linguistic dexterity by leveraging it to maintain both professional identity and personal safety.

Another powerful linguistic strategy used by teachers in the Northwest Region during the political crisis was the employment of polysemic language. Terms like *“justice,” “liberation,”* and *“awakening”* that carry layered meanings depending on context. These words were often integrated into classroom discussions in ways that allowed both teachers and students to critically reflect on the sociopolitical situation without overtly referencing the conflict. This subtle resistance enabled teachers to navigate restrictive educational environments while still fostering civic consciousness. For instance, one literature teacher shared, *“We speak of Achebe, and the students understand. They draw parallels with themselves.”* Such coded communication, as discussed by Freire (2000), exemplifies how language can simultaneously reflect and reshape social reality. This strategy was especially evident in the teaching of postcolonial literature. Texts like Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart*, Mongo Beti’s *Mission to Kala*, and Nkemngong Nkengasong’s *Across the Mongolo* became platforms for indirect critique. Through analysis of these works, students engaged with themes of betrayal, identity, resistance, and marginalization; issues deeply resonant with their lived experiences. Teachers used these texts not only to meet curricular goals but also to create a space for what Giroux (2024) describes as critical pedagogy: the development of consciousness and agency through education. In doing so, literature classrooms evolved into safe zones of symbolic resistance, where ambiguity shielded both teacher and learner, even as powerful critiques were shared and understood.



Irony and sarcasm emerged as another potent layer of discursive resistance among teachers navigating the turbulent terrain of political conflict in the Northwest Region of Cameroon. In interviews, many educators revealed how they strategically used ironic statements during lessons, particularly when addressing state-promoted ideals such as “peace,” “unity,” or “normalcy.” A commonly cited example was the phrase, *The situation is under control, We must be grateful for the calm in the land,* often uttered moments after describing the arson on a school or the disappearance of a colleague. This intentional contradiction between statement and context was not lost on students, who learned to read between the lines. Such use of irony served a dual function. It allowed teachers to comply with professional norms while simultaneously inviting learners to critically interrogate the official narratives they encounter in the media or civic education. This strategy resonates with Achugar’s (2016) findings on post-conflict pedagogy, where teachers in politically sensitive contexts rely on discursive indirection to promote critical thinking while avoiding direct confrontation with state ideologies. In this way, irony became both a pedagogical tool and a survival mechanism.

Silence itself was not merely an absence of speech but a carefully cultivated communicative strategy or what can be termed a “vocabulary of absence.” Teachers often employed phrases such as *“Let us not go there,”* or *“Some things are better understood than said,”* to indicate boundaries of permissible discourse while simultaneously acknowledging shared knowledge of traumatic or politically sensitive events. These phrases acted as tacit invitations for reflection, encouraging students to read the emotional and political undercurrents beneath the surface of classroom interaction. In this context, silence was heavily charged. It functioned as a semiotic act that carried meaning, signalled danger, and established complicity between teacher and learner. Rather than indicating ignorance or disengagement, it embodied what Bourdieu (1991) describes as strategic censorship, an internalized response to external power structures. Such moments of silence were often accompanied by knowing looks, long pauses, or a sudden shift in tone, further reinforcing the layered nature of the communication. Teachers thus cultivated a pedagogy where what was *not* said was as significant as what was, using silence to express resistance, caution, and emotional solidarity in an environment where speech could be dangerous.

Importantly, some teachers adopted what can be described as a dual discourse; one that critiqued both the state and non-state actors with equal subtlety and precision. In interviews, teachers conveyed disillusionment with all factions involved in the crisis. One teacher pointedly remarked, *“They say they are fighting for us, but who asked them?”*. This is a rhetorical question aimed at the separatist fighters claiming to defend Anglophone interests. Another observed, *“Our protectors come with guns, and our liberators demand silence,”* a statement that subtly referenced both the Cameroonian military and the armed separatists, exposing the moral contradictions on both sides. This type of balanced critique reflects what Fairclough (2023) would describe as a resistance discourse operating within tightly controlled ideological boundaries. Teachers used such language to signal ethical discontent while maintaining personal safety. The strategy allowed them to question the legitimacy of all violent actors without explicitly aligning with any one group, thus fostering a critical space for dialogue and reflection. In a highly polarized environment, this dual discourse served both as a protective shield and a tool of conscientization in line with Freirean pedagogy.

Ultimately, these lexical strategies show that language functions as a terrain of both ideological resistance and ethical responsibility, especially in crisis contexts like the Northwest Region of Cameroon. Far from being passive transmitters of government sanctioned curriculum, the teachers in this study emerged as active negotiators of meaning and risk. Their vocabulary choices ranging from coded critiques to symbolic silences illustrated a deep engagement with the sociopolitical tensions around them. Words became tools not only for instruction, but for resistance, healing, and social questioning. These educators crafted a pedagogy of cautious dissent, embedding critique within familiar phrases, texts, and gestures that could evade surveillance yet inspire critical reflection. As Freire (2000) asserts, education is never neutral; and in this context, teachers embraced that truth through discursive practices that walked the line between survival and subversion. In doing so, they exemplified the potential of language to preserve dignity, provoke consciousness, and resist injustice even in the most constrained circumstances.

## SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

This study set out to explore the ways in which teachers in the Northwest Region of Cameroon employed language as a subtle yet significant tool of resistance during an ongoing political crisis. Drawing on interviews, classroom observations, and document analysis, and framed by Critical Discourse Analysis and Critical Pedagogy, the research illuminated the strategic role of lexical choices in contexts of oppression and fear. Findings revealed that teachers did not remain passive or neutral actors during the crisis. Instead, they crafted and adopted a nuanced vocabulary of resistance that allowed them to address socio-political realities without overt confrontation. This vocabulary took several forms, including metaphor, irony, ambiguity, agentless constructions, and even strategic silence. These discursive choices were deeply informed by local cultural norms, pedagogical ethics, and the practical need for self-preservation in a conflict zone. Teachers used metaphorical language rooted in local proverbs and oral traditions to indirectly critique both state violence and separatist threats. Their reliance on passive voice and indirect reference reflected a conscious strategy to minimize personal risk while acknowledging the political situation. Simultaneously, the use of polysemic and literary texts allowed them to promote critical thinking among learners without explicitly naming the crisis.

Importantly, the findings also showed that teachers navigated a balanced discursive resistance, critiquing both state and non-state actors. This dual resistance demonstrated a high level of ethical reflexivity, where teachers sought to remain aligned with the ideals of justice, peace, and truth without becoming mouthpieces for either side in the conflict. Overall, the study found that the teachers' vocabulary of resistance was not random but purposeful, situated within a broader framework of critical pedagogy and shaped by the ideological, cultural, and existential challenges of teaching during war. Their discursive strategies served not only as tools of resistance but also as acts of hope, solidarity, and ethical engagement.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings of this study, several recommendations are advanced for educational policy, teacher training, and conflict-sensitive pedagogy in Cameroon and other conflict-affected contexts.

### 1. Institutionalize Critical Pedagogy in Teacher Training

Teacher education programs in Cameroon should integrate modules on critical pedagogy, discourse analysis, and ethics in conflict-sensitive environments. Training should empower educators to understand the socio-political implications of their language and to use discursive strategies that promote reflection, peacebuilding, and resistance to injustice. As Giroux (2024) and Nkwetisama (2021) argue, equipping teachers with these tools not only transforms classrooms but builds resilient and engaged communities.

### 2. Develop Safe Dialogic Spaces for Educators

There is a need for structured, safe forums where teachers can share their experiences, fears, and discursive strategies during crises. These spaces would foster collective reflection, psychological support, and solidarity, which are crucial in contexts where speaking out publicly may be dangerous. Institutions like CEC PES and teacher unions could facilitate such platforms.

### 3. Promote Ethical Neutrality and Balanced Critique

Educational authorities should acknowledge that teachers cannot remain entirely apolitical in times of crisis, but they can model ethical neutrality resisting the co-optation of education by either state or non-state forces. Policies should encourage teachers to promote human rights, civic engagement, and critical inquiry while avoiding alignment with violent actors.

### 4. Protect Teachers as Agents of Social Cohesion

Given the role teachers play in maintaining civic order and critical consciousness, it is crucial for both government and civil society to provide them with enhanced security, psychosocial support, and recognition.

Policies should formally recognize the emotional and ideological labour of educators in conflict zones and include them in peacebuilding and reconciliation efforts.

## CONCLUSION

This study set out to examine the vocabulary of resistance employed by teachers during the political crisis in the Northwest Region of Cameroon, posing the critical question: *Should teachers stay quiet?* Using qualitative data from interviews and observations, and framed within the theoretical lenses of Critical Pedagogy and Critical Discourse Analysis, the research explored how teachers use language to respond to both state and non-state pressures. The study found that teachers strategically employed metaphors, indirect language, irony, and silence not as signs of disengagement but as acts of calculated resistance and ethical positioning. Far from being passive, their language reflected a deep awareness of their social responsibility and a desire to protect learners, question injustice, and preserve hope. Teachers walked a tightrope resisting state related imperatives and separatist coercion while navigating the ethical constraints of their professional role. The findings thus affirm that teachers are not only educators but also cultural and political agents. Their lexical choices during conflict reflect both their fears and their aspirations. In giving voice to this silent resistance, the study calls for greater recognition of teachers' roles in peacebuilding and for educational policies that empower them as ethical and discursive actors in times of crisis.

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