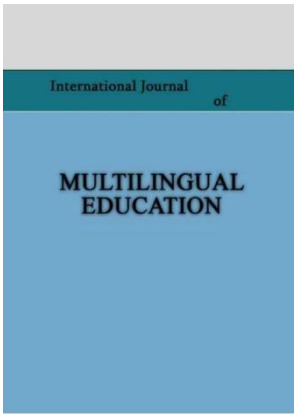

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Multilingual Education and Literacy in Ghana: Bridging Language Ideologies,Policy and Practice

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ABSTRACT

Ghana has a very rich linguistic environment that currently includes over 70 languages. While we have policies that support the use of the mother tongue in the classroom, we see the dominance of English, which is a legacy of the colonial past and a result of social expectation. We examined this issue through a review of 14 peer-reviewed studies and policy documents from 2015 to 2024, which we examined in terms of language beliefs, policy implementation, and real-time classroom experience.

What we found is a large-scale and consistent gap between what is put forth in policy and what is actually playing out in schools. English is going to language right from the start of a child's school life. In addition, we see that this preference for a single language in the classroom, which we term monolingual teaching, is a factor in lower literacy levels, particularly among rural and under-served communities. Also, only 20% of our teachers are reported to be using what we term translanguaging, which is a practice of switching between languages to support learning.

At the same time, we see that in the few settings where we do have bilingual classrooms, we see that students report higher cultural identity, greater self-confidence, and better academic performance. Our study puts forth the idea that we should extend native language instruction past the primary level, make indigenous languages a requirement, and at the same time we put forth the idea that we should greatly increase support for teacher training in issues of translanguaging and culturally responsive teaching..

Keywords*: Multilingual education, Language policy, Translanguaging, Educational equity, Cultural identity, Ghana*

Introduction

Background

Ghana is home to over 70 indigenous languages spoken in the country's 16 regions (Owu-Ewie & Eshun, 2019). This large language base is a reflection of rich cultural heritage, which at the same time presents issues related to equal access to education. Post-independence language in education policy has seen a saw between support for local languages and the use of English as a medium of instruction. The dominance of English, which was put in place during colonial rule, has in to a great extent become a part of the Ghanaian educational system, which uses it not only for instruction but also as a symbol

of social mobility and global relevance (Ansah, 2014; Anyidoho, 2018).

In addition, while post-colonial policy changes at times favored native language instruction in primary school, we have seen a shift back to English due to globalization and economic issues. For instance, the 2007 and 2016 education policies that pushed for English language instruction in Grade 4 saw wide-scale implementation of the use of English in Kindergarten, which went against what was put forth by the policies. This early shift to English has a great impact on literacy development, which we see in rural and marginalized communities. Many kids enter school speaking only their local language and have a hard time with the English medium of instruction, which in turn leads to poor academic performance and high dropout rates (Ngman-wara, 2008; Behrmann, 2018). At the same time, we see that children who are taught in their first language do better in reading and have more positive learning attitudes (Cummins, 2015).

Language Ideologies in the Educational Space

In Ghana, English is seen as a language of economic power, intelligence, and progress, while local languages are viewed as informal and inadequate for academic settings (Edu-Buandoh & Otchere, 2012; Amfo & Anderson, 2019). These ideas play a key role in what we see in the classroom and policy. Despite the worldwide push for multi-linguistic education for inclusive learning, local language instruction is a no-go area for these ideologies. In the classroom, we see that teachers choose English even when it is not what is prescribed by policy and many parents are against local language instruction for their children, which they think will put their children at a disadvantage (Bronteng et al., 2019). This gap between what the policy says and what is practiced creates system-wide confusion and pedagogical inconsistency.

Policy Variations and Issues of Implementation

Over the past two decades, Ghana has seen many changes and what may be described as a very mixed bag of approaches to language use in our educational policies. In the 2007 and 2016 reforms, we see an emphasis on the early introduction of English, while the National Literacy Acceleration Program (NALAP) puts out to strengthen local language instruction at the primary level. In addition, in 2016, we saw the removal of indigenous languages as a requirement in secondary schools, which is a tale of policy inconsistency that in turn has a negative impact on the design of our curricula, teacher training, and the quality of student learning (Nkrumah & Ansah, 2020).

In addition, we still see large-scale issues in the implementation of these policies; this is very much the case in rural schools, which often do not have a clear language of instruction policy, which in turn

is not well enforced. In addition, teachers are not given the training in bi-or multilingual pedagogy that they require and do not have the local language resources they need. These issues play a role in creating unequal learning environments across the country, and we see this play out most in students from non-English speaking homes (Nie, 2023).

Study's Aim and Objectives

This review looks at how language ideologies, policy structures, and classroom practices play out to determine literacy results in Ghana. Also we aim to:

i. Look at the role of language ideologies in the development of multilingual education policy and practice

ii. See how national policy aligns with what goes on in the class room

iii. Identify what is getting in the way of proper policy implementation

iv. What we think are best practices for improving linguistic equity and culturally relevant pedagogy in Ghanaian schools.

Significance of the Study

This issue of language policy outpacing classroom practice, which we see as growing in Ghana's education sector, is what this study looks at – it also puts forward to national and regional conversations, which put forth the idea of using multilingualism as a tool for inclusive education and social equity. We analyze through empirical studies, policy analysis, and what we see in global practices, which we then turn into practical policies for change in the classroom. We also present these in a way that is of use to policymakers, educators, and researchers who are dedicated to improving literacy in diverse linguistic environments.

Methodology

Study design

In this review, we used a systematic approach that analyzed peer-reviewed literature and policy documents related to multilingual education in Ghana. We aimed to synthesize research on language ideologies, classroom practices, and literacy outcomes from 2015 to 2024. We incorporated both qualitative and quantitative perspectives to study the structural and pedagogical aspects of language use in schools.

Search strategy

We searched 4 databases which were JSTOR, ERIC, Web of Science, and Google Scholar. We used Boolean logic and keyword combinations in our search. Primary terms included "Language

policy Ghana," "Multilingual education Ghana," "Translanguaging," " Literacy outcomes," and "Indigenous languages." We also included: "Bilingualism", "Cultural pedagogy", "Educational equity", "and Ghanaian classroom practices". The search strategy included studies that used related terms, such as code-switching and mother-tongue instruction.

Included sources:

- Peer reviewed articles
- Policy documents
- Grey literature from reputable institutions (for example UNICEF, Ghana Education Service)
- English language publications from 2015 – 2024
- Research which focused on Ghanaian educational settings

Excluded sources:

- Non English publications
- Studies published before 2015
- Research from out of Ghana

Data Sources

The review covered 14 peer-reviewed studies, including National Literacy Acceleration Programme (NALAP) documents (2016–2024), UNESCO multilingual education reports, and reports by UNICEF Ghana and Ghana Education Service.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis (Siddaway et al., 2018). Three themes guided the coding process: language ideologies and societal attitudes, policy-practice mismatches in schools, and translanguaging and pedagogical strategies. Inter-rater reliability was checked to ensure consistency in theme identification. Quantitative data were used to reinforce the trends identified in the literature.

Critical Appraisal

Study quality was assessed using the CASP guidelines for qualitative studies, AMSTAR 2 tool for systematic reviews, and sample size and generalizability indicators for quantitative studies. The appraisal revealed methodological strengths, including mixed-methods designs (Davis & Agbenyega, 2012), as well as limitations, such as urban bias and a lack of primary classroom data.

Results

This section presents findings from a systematic review of 14 peer-reviewed studies and policy documents, grouped into three major themes: (1) language ideologies and policy implementation, (2) classroom practices and translanguaging, and (3) the effects of language use on student outcomes. These results reflect patterns across rural and urban schools, varied teacher training levels, and inconsistencies between national educational goals and local implementation.

Language Ideologies and Policy Implementation

A dominant pattern observed across 80% of the reviewed studies is the pervasive societal preference for English as the "language of success" (Agbozo & ResCue, 2020; Davis & Agbenyega, 2012). English is closely associated with intelligence, career opportunities, and global relevance, whereas indigenous languages are often perceived as inadequate for academic or professional advancement (Ansah, 2014). These ideologies shape not only individual attitudes but also institutional practices.

Although Ghana's education policies promote the use of indigenous languages in the early grades, their implementation is weak. Teachers often abandon the prescribed local language curriculum in favor of English instruction, especially in urban and peri-urban areas (Amfo & Anderson, 2019). Many schools adopt English as the medium of instruction from kindergarten, directly contravening policy directives that recommend local language instruction up to at least Grade 3 (Owu-Ewie & Eshun, 2019).

The 2016 policy shift, which removed indigenous languages from the core secondary school curriculum, exacerbated this problem. Educators reported a lack of clarity in the guidelines and uncertainty over the long-term status of local languages in education. This has contributed to reduced resource allocation, fewer local language materials, and a declining interest in teaching indigenous languages (Nkrumah and Ansah 2020).

Classroom Practices and Translanguaging

Seventy percent of the reviewed studies noted a significant gap between policy and classroom practice, particularly in rural schools. Although translanguaging—the strategic use of multiple languages in instruction—is encouraged in theory, it is rarely implemented systematically in the classroom. Most teachers lack formal training on how to integrate students' linguistic repertoires into lessons (Agbozo & ResCue, 2020).

Where translanguaging occurs, it is often incidental or reactive rather than planned. Teachers may

resort to code-switching to clarify complex concepts, but without structured pedagogy, this does not translate into meaningful bilingual instruction (Berson, 2020). A study in Ghana's Central Region found that core subjects, such as mathematics and science, were delivered in English, while local languages were reserved for informal or supplementary discussions (Edu-Buandoh & Otchere, 2012).

Furthermore, many teachers fear that using indigenous languages may hinder students' English proficiency, especially in preparation for high-stake examinations. This belief leads to resistance toward multilingual pedagogy and a preference for monolingual English instruction, despite the known cognitive and literacy benefits of mother-tongue education (Ngman-wara, 2008; Cummins, 2015).

Student Outcomes and Educational Inequity

The review found consistent evidence that learners taught in their first language performed better in early literacy and comprehension tasks. For example, grade 3 students who received instruction in both their native language and English outperformed their peers in English-only classrooms by as much as 30% in literacy assessments (Ngman-wara, 2008). This achievement gap was especially pronounced in abstract subjects such as mathematics and science, where students struggled to grasp concepts in an unfamiliar language (Behrmann, 2018).

The psychological impact of language exclusion was also evident. More than 60% of students in English-dominant classrooms report feelings of cultural detachment and low confidence in their ability to learn (Bronteng et al., 2019). In contrast, students in schools where local languages were integrated into the curriculum demonstrated stronger engagement, higher self-esteem, and greater interest in schoolwork (Anyidoho, 2018).

Language-based inequities are more severe in rural areas. Many rural learners enter school with no exposure to English and encounter a sudden transition to English-only instruction by grade 3. This transition often leads to high dropout rates, especially among children from non-literate households and speakers of minority languages (Johnston & Ksoll, 2022; Nie, 2023). These challenges are compounded by a lack of qualified teachers, insufficient textbooks in local languages, and minimal digital resources.

In urban schools, although the infrastructure is better, students still experience subtle linguistic stratification. A 2020 survey found that 75% of secondary students associated English with "intelligence" and local languages with "tradition" or "home life," reinforcing linguistic hierarchies that disadvantage non-English-speaking students socially and academically (Agbozo and ResCue 2020).

Discussion

Policy-Practice Disjuncture in Multilingual Education

The findings confirm a persistent gap between Ghana's language-in-education policies and classroom reality. Although the official stance supported mother-tongue instruction in the early years, most schools adopted English from the outset (Davis & Agbenyega, 2012; Agbozo & ResCue, 2020). This reflects a broader systemic failure in educational governance, where policies are not sufficiently aligned with teacher capacities, instructional materials, or community expectations.

The 2016 removal of indigenous languages from the secondary curriculum illustrates the policy inconsistency that undermines long-term educational planning (Ansah, 2014). As schools shifted toward English-dominant models, teacher preparedness and community trust in multilingual education weakened. Without sustained investment and clear direction, these shifts risk marginalizing already disadvantaged learners, particularly those from rural and low-literacy households.

This policy-practice mismatch reflects what Ball (1993) describes as "policy enactment failure," where the translation of written policy into classroom realities is obstructed by contextual constraints, such as under-resourced schools, limited teacher training, and conflicting societal expectations.

Colonial Language Ideologies and Sociolinguistic Power

Language ideologies that equate English with success and local languages with inferiority have deep colonial roots and remain entrenched in Ghana's educational structure and societal mindset (Anyidoho, 2018; Edu-Buandoh & Otchere, 2012). During British colonial rule, English was institutionalised as the language of administration, commerce, and formal education. This legacy established a linguistic hierarchy in which English symbolised intelligence, authority, and economic advancement, while local languages were relegated to informal or domestic domains. Post-independence, rather than dismantling these hierarchies, educational reforms often reinforced them by continuing to privilege English in both curriculum design and high-stake examinations.

These ideologies are pervasive across social classes. Among the elite, fluency in English is often viewed as a marker of prestige and global citizenship. In grassroots communities, parents and guardians increasingly associate English proficiency with upward mobility, academic success, and access to modern opportunities. As a result, even when policies recommend mother-tongue instruction in early education, there is social pressure from families and school authorities to adopt English from the first year of schooling, sometimes even in preschool settings.

This social bias toward English persists despite a robust body of research demonstrating that children learn best when instructed in a language that they understand. Empirical studies have shown

that mother-tongue education supports not only foundational literacy but also cognitive flexibility, emotional security, and long-term academic achievement (Cummins, 2015; Ngman-wara, 2008). Local language instruction has been linked to higher levels of classroom participation, critical thinking, and a stronger sense of cultural identity (Bronteng et al. 2019). However, these benefits are frequently overlooked in practice, as language policy remains shaped by ideological beliefs rather than pedagogical evidence.

Furthermore, the ongoing privileging of English marginalizes speakers of minority languages and creates a system in which linguistic capital is unevenly distributed. Students who speak dominant local languages, such as Twi or Ewe, may still find some representation in the curriculum, while those who speak less widely used languages may experience complete linguistic exclusion. This reinforces educational inequality and limits the inclusivity of national development goals. Therefore, addressing colonial language ideologies is not merely a pedagogical challenge but a broader cultural and political imperative.

Such ideologies are not value-neutral; rather, they function as powerful mechanisms for reproducing social inequality. By elevating English as the preferred or "superior" language of education, employment, and governance, Ghana's language practices reinforce linguistic hierarchies that systematically favour urban, English-speaking learners and marginalise those from rural or multilingual backgrounds. These hierarchies are deeply embedded in the education system and perpetuated through curriculum design, teacher expectations, assessment standards, and even classroom interactions.

As Fairclough (1989) asserts, language is not simply a tool for communication; it is a site of power where access, identity, and opportunity are negotiated and controlled. In the Ghanaian context, the dominance of English creates invisible barriers for learners who come to school by speaking only their mother tongue. These students are often forced to learn new content in a language that they do not understand, placing them at a disadvantage from the outset. Meanwhile, children from English-speaking households—usually located in urban centers —enjoy a head start, further widening the educational achievement gap.

The power of English is reinforced through high-stake assessments and national examinations, which are almost exclusively administered in English. These practices implicitly convey the message that success is only attainable through English proficiency, thereby diminishing the perceived value of indigenous languages and their cultural knowledge. Students who are unable to quickly adapt to English-medium instruction are often labelled as slow or underperforming, even though their cognitive abilities may be intact or even exceptional in their first language.

This linguistic bias does more than hinder academic performance; it erodes self-esteem and cultural identity. When children are taught to associate their home language with failure and English with intelligence, they internalise feelings of inadequacy and distance themselves from their own communities. This alienation not only undermines learning outcomes but also weakens the role of education as a tool for national cohesion and identity formation.

Therefore, recognizing and addressing these linguistic power dynamics is crucial for any serious effort to achieve equity in education. A multilingual model that values and incorporates local languages as vehicles for learning and expression can dismantle these entrenched hierarchies, create more inclusive classrooms, and ensure that all students, regardless of their language background, have an equal opportunity to succeed.

Furthermore, the language used in educational settings plays a pivotal role in shaping students' self-concept, social identity, and emotional well-being. Schools are not just spaces for cognitive development; they are also cultural and psychological environments in which learners form ideas about who they are and where they belong. When students are systematically discouraged—explicitly or implicitly—from using their home languages, they begin to internalise negative messages about the worth of their linguistic heritage. This process leads to what has been described as linguistic shame, in which students perceive their mother tongues as inferior, outdated, or unsuitable for academic and professional success (Bronteng et al., 2019).

This internalised inferiority has far-reaching effects. Students who feel that their identity is not acknowledged in a learning environment often struggle with low self-esteem, reduced classroom participation, and poor academic confidence. They may disengage from learning altogether or underperform not because of a lack of ability but because the school environment subtly signals that success is tied to rejecting one's cultural and linguistic roots. This can contribute to long-term educational marginalisation, especially among speakers of minority or less "prestigious" local languages.

In contrast, students educated in environments that embrace their linguistic and cultural identities tend to demonstrate higher levels of motivation, confidence, and resilience. Bilingual and culturally inclusive classrooms allow learners to see their home languages not as barriers but as assets for learning and expression. These environments validate students' lived experiences, reinforcing a positive sense of self and cultural pride (Amponsah, 2023).

When educators actively incorporate indigenous languages, local proverbs, oral traditions, and community knowledge into the curriculum, students feel a deeper connection with what they are learning. This not only enhances comprehension but also affirms their identity and belonging. Such

practices are especially important in diverse societies such as Ghana, where national unity must be built on the recognition of linguistic and cultural plurality, not uniformity.

Ultimately, inclusive language practices in education foster what scholars call additive bilingualism, a model in which students gain new language skills (such as English) without losing the cognitive, emotional, and cultural benefits of their first language. Promoting additive bilingualism through policy and pedagogy is essential for developing well-rounded learners who are academically capable, emotionally secure, and culturally grounded.

Translanguaging as a Transformative Pedagogy

Despite being acknowledged in policy discourse as a viable multilingual strategy, translanguaging remains severely underutilised in Ghanaian classrooms. One of the most significant barriers is the lack of sustained teacher training in multilingual pedagogy. Most teachers are unfamiliar with the theoretical foundations and practical applications of translanguaging. Instead, their training and classroom routines often reflect monolingual norms, prioritising English as the sole medium of instruction (Agbozo & ResCue, 2020). Without professional development that equips educators with working with multiple languages effectively, translanguaging is unlikely to move beyond theory into daily teaching practice.

The rigid structure of the national curriculum further restricts the flexibility required to implement translanguaging strategies. Lesson plans and textbooks are overwhelmingly English-centric, offering little room for teachers to adapt their content or incorporate indigenous linguistic resources. Even when teachers recognise the potential benefits of using students' home languages, they often feel constrained by time, syllabus expectations, and a lack of multilingual materials.

Moreover, standardised assessments are conducted almost exclusively in English, reinforcing the notion that academic success depends on mastery of that language. This emphasis creates a high-pressure environment where both teachers and students feel compelled to use English exclusively to meet performance benchmarks, thereby discouraging any use of local languages, even when such use would support comprehension and engagement.

However, translanguaging holds significant potential as a pedagogical approach. It allows students to draw from their full linguistic repertoires—combining local languages and English—not just for communication but for meaning-making, problem-solving, and critical thinking. In this way, translanguaging acknowledges the realities of multilingual learners and builds bridges between home and school, and community and classroom.

Cenoz (2017) and García and Wei (2014) argue that translanguaging transforms the classroom into

a linguistically inclusive space where students are not penalised for using their home language but encouraged to leverage it for deeper learning. In the Ghanaian context, this could involve students explaining mathematical concepts in Ewe, reflecting on social studies in Dagbani, or drafting story outlines in Twi before translating them into English. These practices do not undermine English acquisition; rather, they enhance metalinguistic awareness and foster holistic literacy development.

For translanguaging to become a practical reality, it must be institutionalised across multiple levels—teacher education, classroom resources, curriculum policy, and assessment design. Educators should be supported with ongoing professional learning, access to multilingual teaching aids, and the freedom to innovate within the curriculum. When done effectively, translanguaging empowers students, reduces linguistic anxiety, and transforms classrooms into spaces for inclusion and affirmation.

Cenoz (2017) distinguished translanguaging from simple code-switching by framing it as a deliberate, student-centered pedagogical practice. Unlike code-switching, which often occurs spontaneously or subconsciously, translanguaging involves the intentional use of multiple languages to scaffold learning, deepen comprehension, and validate students' linguistic identities. It allows learners to engage with content in ways that reflect their real-world communicative practices, moving beyond rigid language boundaries to foster holistic understanding.

In the Ghanaian educational context, translanguaging has shown promising outcomes, particularly in science and mathematics instruction, where abstract concepts often present barriers to comprehension. Case studies by Amponsah (2023) revealed that when teachers use local metaphors, indigenous terminology, and oral storytelling alongside English, students are more engaged and better able to grasp difficult ideas. For instance, using analogies from farming, drumming, or local market trade to explain scientific processes or numerical patterns makes lessons more relatable and culturally grounded. These strategies not only bridge conceptual gaps but also elevate local knowledge systems, positioning them as legitimate sources of academic insight.

However, despite these encouraging examples, such practices remain isolated and unsystematised. They often depend on the individual initiatives of culturally responsive teachers who go beyond the curriculum to connect with their students' linguistic and cultural realities. The formal curriculum does not explicitly support translanguaging or provide guidance on how to implement it effectively. As a result, most educators lack both encouragement and resources to apply these methods consistently.

Furthermore, the current structure of high-stake examinations in English discourages innovation. Teachers fear that deviating from English-dominant instruction will hinder students' performance in national assessments, which are critical to academic progression. This tension discourages the

incorporation of translanguaging into core instruction, especially in upper primary and junior high levels, where exam preparation intensifies.

To unlock the full potential of translanguaging in Ghanaian schools, there is a need for curricular reform that formally recognises multilingual pedagogy. This includes embedding translanguaging into subject syllabi, producing multilingual textbooks, and training teachers in both the theory and practical application of this approach. When embedded systemically, translanguaging can transform classrooms into inclusive, cognitively rich environments in which all students, not just English-proficient ones, can thrive.

For translanguaging to take root and flourish as an effective instructional strategy, it must be institutionalised across all levels of the education system—from teacher education programmes to curriculum design, textbook development, and classroom assessments. A piecemeal or informal approach would not suffice. Instead, translanguaging must be positioned as a core element of multilingual pedagogy, supported by national policy and backed by resources, training, and ongoing professional development.

Central to this institutionalisation is the preparation of teachers. Most educators currently enter the classroom with limited exposure to multilingual strategies and even less training in how to manage multiple languages effectively in a single lesson. Therefore, teacher education curricula—both pre-service and in-service—must explicitly include modules of translanguaging theory and practice. These modules should not only introduce the concept as a classroom tool but also engage educators with its theoretical underpinnings: sociolinguistic competence, cognitive advantages of bilingualism, inclusive pedagogy, and the political significance of validating all languages in education.

Such training should focus on practical classroom applications. Teachers need concrete strategies for lesson planning, selecting multilingual resources, managing linguistic diversity in heterogeneous classrooms, and assessing learning in English and other local languages. Case-based learning, co-teaching models, and community-based language resources can enhance teachers' confidence in deploying translanguaging effectively. Furthermore, peer mentorship and collaborative learning among teachers can help establish a culture of innovation and reflection on language use in schools.

In addition, textbooks and learning materials must reflect on the principles of translanguaging. This includes incorporating bilingual content, side-by-side translations, and culturally grounded explanations using metaphors and examples drawn from students' lived experiences. Without such materials, teachers are left to design their own strategies from scratch, an unrealistic expectation, particularly in under-resourced schools.

Classroom assessments must also evolve. The current assessment culture, which often measures

success solely through English-medium examinations, implicitly discourages the use of local languages. Formative and summative evaluations should allow students to demonstrate understanding in multiple languages where appropriate. For example, a student could be encouraged to explain a concept in a local language orally and then write a short response in English, showing both comprehension and bilingual proficiency.

Ultimately, embedding translanguaging in teacher education, materials, and assessments transforms it from a marginal strategy to a mainstream pedagogical tool. This shift ensures that multilingualism is not simply tolerated but celebrated and leveraged for learning. It equips teachers with the competence and confidence to honor linguistic diversity, improve learner outcomes, and create inclusive classrooms that reflect the linguistic realities of Ghanaian society.

Structural and Regional Inequalities

Multilingual education in Ghana is unevenly implemented across geographical regions, and this disparity underscores deeper structural inequalities in the country's education system. Urban schools—especially those located in metropolitan areas like Accra, Kumasi, and Cape Coast—are often better resourced, with access to well-trained teachers, multilingual teaching materials, and more favorable teacher-to-student ratios. These schools are likely to benefit from donor support, regular monitoring by district education officers, and strong parental involvement. In such settings, teachers may have access to professional development opportunities and occasionally engage in multilingual practices, albeit within an English-dominated framework.

In contrast, rural and peri-urban schools face chronic challenges that directly hinder the effective implementation of multilingual education. Many of these schools lack basic infrastructure, such as electricity, libraries, or functioning classrooms. Even more critically, they often operate without a sufficient number of trained teachers, particularly those fluent in the local languages of the region. As Nie (2023) and Arhin-Asamoah (2023) observed, many rural teachers are either posted to linguistic zones where they do not speak the dominant local language or have received little training in bilingual instructional strategies. This disconnect results in teachers defaulting to English-only instruction, not out of preference, but necessity.

The absence of teaching and learning materials in local languages further complicates implementation. Where materials exist, they are often outdated, poorly distributed, or not tailored to the specific linguistic communities they are meant to serve. The logistical burden of distributing multilingual materials to remote areas, coupled with a centralised curriculum model, makes it difficult for rural schools to adapt lessons to the linguistic realities of their learners.

This unevenness amplifies the rural-urban achievement gap. Learners in urban areas tend to have a smoother transition into English-medium instruction due to early exposure through the media, educated parents, or private pre-schools. Conversely, children in rural areas frequently experience language shocks and sudden exposure to a new language at the onset of formal education, which hinders comprehension, reduces classroom participation, and negatively affects literacy development. Over time, this initial disadvantage leads to higher dropout rates, lower exam performance, and reduced progression to the secondary and tertiary levels among rural learners.

Moreover, lack of oversight and support in rural districts means that language-in-education policies are poorly enforced. Teachers in these areas often work in isolation, without mentorship or feedback on language use, and are rarely monitored for compliance with national language guidelines. Consequently, the implementation of multilingual education has become highly inconsistent, varying not only between regions but from one classroom to another, depending on the background, beliefs, and capacity of individual teachers.

Addressing these disparities requires targeted investment in rural education, including the recruitment of linguistically matched teachers, the development of region-specific learning materials, and the creation of incentive structures that support retention and capacity-building in underserved areas. Without such measures, multilingual education in Ghana risks becoming a privilege for urban learners, thereby entrenching linguistic and educational inequities across generations.

Moreover, teachers in rural areas often find themselves navigating complex social pressures that influence their classroom language choices more strongly than formal policy mandates. Despite government guidelines advocating the use of local languages in the early years of primary education, many rural educators report that parents and community leaders actively encourage the early use of English, even when students are not developmentally ready for such a transition. This pressure stems from deeply rooted beliefs about the instrumental value of English in shaping children's prospects.

In these contexts, parental expectations are not necessarily aligned with pedagogical best practices but are shaped by a broader social narrative. National examinations, conducted exclusively in English, serve as high-stakes gateways to secondary and tertiary education, employment, and social mobility. Consequently, many families believe that the earlier their children are exposed to English, the better their chances of academic and professional success will be. This belief is further reinforced by media portrayals that associate English fluency with intelligence, modernity, and global citizenship, while positioning local languages as outdated or culturally confined.

These sociocultural ideologies exert pressure on teachers, many of whom must balance the expectations of their communities with their professional judgment. In some cases, teachers have

reported being questioned or even criticized for using indigenous languages in instruction, regardless of policy or evident comprehension benefits for learners. The fear that children who are not immersed in English from the earliest grades will "fall behind" or be ill-equipped to compete on national exams adds urgency to the community's push for English-only teaching, even if it contradicts the cognitive development stages of early learners.

This situation creates a policy-practice tension in which teachers are caught between two conflicting forces: policy prescriptions that recommend mother-tongue instruction and societal demands for English that are fuelled by high-stakes assessments and perceived economic value. Consequently, even well-intentioned multilingual education reforms may fail unless accompanied by community-level engagement strategies that reshape public perception and build grassroots support for bilingual approaches.

Effective policy interventions must therefore extend beyond the classroom and curriculum. They must engage parents, community leaders, and local stakeholders in conversations about the benefits of mother-tongue education and the cognitive science that supports it. Public campaigns, community workshops, and local media can help shift the narrative around indigenous languages from one limitation to empowerment. By aligning community aspirations with educational realities, such interventions can foster an environment in which both teachers and students feel supported in using the full range of their linguistic resources.

Implications for Equity, Culture, and Sustainable Literacy

The implications of these findings extend far beyond the classroom and touch upon broader national concerns of equity, cultural survival, and inclusive development. Language, in this sense, is not merely a neutral medium for knowledge transmission. It is a cultural asset, a symbol of identity, and a key determinant of access to opportunities. When children are educated in languages that they do not understand, education becomes a process of exclusion rather than empowerment. In contrast, when instruction is delivered in a familiar language, students are better able to make sense of concepts, express themselves confidently, and draw connections between their education and real-life experiences. This enhances not only academic achievement but also long-term school retention, civic engagement, and emotional well-being.

The role of language in shaping community cohesion and democratic participation should not be underestimated. Schools are among the first spaces in which children engage with public systems, and the language used in that space significantly influences their sense of belonging. Educating children in their home languages affirms their identity and validates the cultural systems they originate from.

This validation fosters respect, self-worth, and social inclusion. On a larger scale, multilingual education nurtures appreciation for linguistic diversity, which is vital in a country like Ghana, where multilingualism is a lived reality and an essential component of social harmony.

Aligning educational policy with these realities means recognising Ghana's multilingualism as a strength, not a problem to be managed or minimised. This requires a shift in perspective: classrooms must be reimagined not as English-only spaces but as culturally dynamic environments where different languages and ways of knowing coexist and inform one another. Such a transformation begins with reframing language policy, moving away from top-down English-centric models toward inclusive frameworks that empower teachers to respond to their learners' linguistic backgrounds. Teachers must be given the autonomy to adapt curricula, which must be supported by appropriate training, assessment flexibility, and access to multilingual teaching resources.

Moreover, educational policies should foster local ownership and contextual relevance. Curriculum design must allow space for local stories, knowledge systems, and oral traditions to be included along with global content. Teaching and learning materials should be produced in multiple languages and tailored to the linguistic profiles of different regions. Multilingual assessment models should be developed to allow learners to demonstrate understanding across languages, especially at the lower primary levels, where language acquisition is still in progress. These structural changes can only succeed if they are accompanied by long-term investments in resource development and continuous community engagement.

In doing so, Ghana can take meaningful strides towards building a just, equitable, and future-ready education system. A system that not only promotes literacy and numeracy but also strengthens social cohesion, protects cultural heritage, and enhances democratic participation. Multilingual education is not simply a pedagogical choice; it is a commitment to inclusive nation-building, one that reflects the lived realities of its people and prepares the next generation to thrive in a diverse, interconnected world.

Conclusion

This review highlights a clear disconnection between Ghana's multilingual education policy and classroom reality. Although policies promote the use of indigenous languages, English remains dominant in the early grades. This is because of colonial legacies, societal expectations, limited teacher training, and inadequate resources.

The dominance of English in schools undermines cultural identity and contributes to lower literacy outcomes for learners from non-English-speaking backgrounds. Evidence shows that students perform

better and develop a stronger cultural identity when taught in their first language. However, classroom practice does not reflect this, especially in under-resourced rural schools.

Translanguaging and culturally responsive teaching can help bridge this gap but are underused due to lack of awareness and institutional support. For Ghana to ensure inclusive and equitable literacy development, policies must be matched with practical strategies that empower teachers and respect linguistic diversity.

Recommendations

For Policymakers

- ✓ Extend mother-tongue instruction beyond grade 3 to strengthen foundational skills.
- ✓ Reinstate indigenous languages as compulsory subjects at all levels.
- ✓ Develop language policies that reflect regional linguistic realities.
- ✓ Ensure fair distribution of funding and learning materials between rural and urban schools.
- ✓ Collaborate with communities to include local knowledge and oral traditions in the curricula.

For Educators

- ✓ Apply translanguaging in lessons to fully utilize students' linguistic abilities.
- ✓ Integrating proverbs, stories, and local examples into subjects across the curriculum.
- ✓ Participate in training on multilingual strategies and culturally relevant pedagogy.
- ✓ Encourage students to use both English and local languages in academic contexts.

For Communities

- ✓ Promote indigenous language use at home and in local institutions.
- ✓ Support school efforts to integrate cultural and linguistic identities into learning.
- ✓ Joining school committees to influence the inclusion of culturally relevant content.
- ✓ Partners with teachers in creating bilingual learning materials.

Future Research Directions

To build on the current findings, the following areas require further research:

- ✓ Longitudinal studies on how translanguaging influences academic performance and identity over time.
- ✓ Comparative studies are needed to understand why rural schools face greater policy implementation challenges than urban ones do.
- ✓ Qualitative research explores teacher beliefs and how colonial history shapes current language practices.

- ✓ Technology-based interventions to assess the role of digital tools in promoting bilingual literacy in under-resourced settings.
- ✓ Inclusive impact studies on how language policies affect marginalised groups, including girls and minority language speakers.
- ✓ Addressing these questions will provide a strong evidence for building a multilingual education system that supports equity, literacy development, and cultural inclusion in Ghana.

Conclusion and Implications

This review confirms that Ghana's multilingual education system, although backed by progressive policies, is undermined by inconsistent implementation, colonial language ideologies, and structural inequities. Despite official support for mother-tongue instruction in the early years of basic education, the reality in classrooms, especially in rural and low-income communities, is largely English dominant. This dissonance reflects a deeper tension between national policy intentions and the prevailing attitudes of educators, policymakers, and communities.

Students benefit academically and emotionally when taught the language they understand. Research has consistently shown that early instruction in one's first language improves literacy outcomes, fosters classroom engagement, and supports identity development. However, many Ghanaian children are subjected to an abrupt linguistic transition from home to school, where the medium of instruction is unfamiliar and disempowering. This undermines their self-confidence and learning potential.

The implications of this policy-practice divide are significant. Language choices in education are not merely technical decisions; they shape access to knowledge, the distribution of opportunity, and the preservation of cultural heritage. When indigenous languages are excluded or marginalised in schools, students internalise their perceived inferiority, and linguistic hierarchies are reproduced.

Addressing this issue is not only a matter of educational reform but also of social justice. Ghana must pursue a model of multilingual education that values all languages as assets and not obstacles. Doing so requires a coordinated effort to reform teacher training, realign curricular content, provide instructional materials in local languages, and rebuild community trust in bilingual and multilingual education.

A shift toward culturally responsive pedagogy is also necessary. Educators should be empowered to draw on local knowledge systems, storytelling traditions, and oral history in their teaching. These culturally rooted strategies make learning more relatable and foster critical thinking and creativity.

The broader implication is that language can reinforce or reduce inequality. A multilingual

education policy that is inclusive, well-resourced, and contextually grounded can improve literacy rates and support national cohesion and honor Ghana's linguistic diversity.

Implications for Policy and Practice

- Policy Clarity and Continuity: Education reforms must be consistent and evidence informed. Sudden policy reversals, such as the removal of indigenous languages from secondary curricula, create confusion and undermine long-term planning.
- Teacher Training and Support: Teachers must be trained in multilingual pedagogy and translanguaging strategies. This includes revising pre-service and in-service training to include modules for language policy, sociolinguistics, and culturally responsive methods.
- Curriculum and Assessment Reform: Local languages should be embedded in the curriculum beyond Grade 3 and formally assessed at all levels. Assessments should allow for multilingual expressions where relevant.
- Community Engagement: Building trust in multilingual education requires involving parents, traditional leaders, and local institutions in language decisions. Awareness campaigns can reshape public perceptions of the value of indigenous languages in education.
- Equitable Resource Allocation: Rural and disadvantaged schools must prioritize the distribution of bilingual textbooks, digital learning tools, and language-teaching aids. Without adequate resources, even the best policies will fail to have an impact.

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