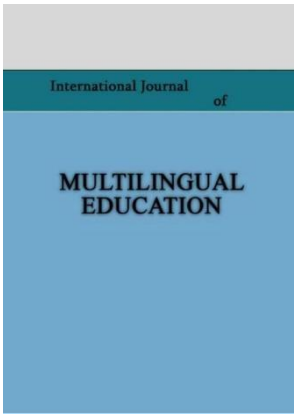

International Journal of
MULTILINGUAL EDUCATION

ISSN: (Print) ISSN 1987-9601
(Online) E ISSN 1512-3146
Journal homepage: https://multilingualeducation.openjournals.ge/

"Sir, Please Can I Speak Twi?": Examining Students' Linguistic Rights in Senior High Schools in Ghana

Eric Antwi
University of Cape Coast, Ghana

Dora Francisca Edu-Buandoh
University of Cape Coast, Ghana

Email: eric.antwi004@stu.ucc.edu.gh

To cite this article: Eric Antwi, Dora Francisca Edu-Buandoh, *"Sir, Please Can I Speak Twi?": Examining Students' Linguistic Rights in Senior High Schools in Ghana:*
International Journal of Multilingual Education, volume 26, issue 2.
DOI: 10.22333/ijme.2025.9800; pp. 91-115.
To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.22333/ijme.2025.9894

E ISSN 1512-3146 (online)
ISSN 1987-9601 (print)
International Journal of Multilingual Education
https://multilingualeducation.openjournals.ge/

Eric Antwi [1]

University of Cape Coast, Ghana

Dora Francisca Edu-Buandoh

University of Cape Coast, Ghana

"Sir, Please Can I Speak Twi?": Examining Students' Linguistic Rights in Senior High Schools in Ghana

ABSTRACT

In multilingual societies, the selection of languages in educational institutions can mirror and perpetuate power imbalances, thus influencing students' educational experiences and sense of identity. This paper examines how language choices in the classroom reflect power dynamics and affect students' linguistic rights. Drawing on **Linguistic Human Rights** (Skutnabb-Kangas & Phillipson, 1995) and **Maher and Tetreault's (1994)** framework of classroom dynamics, the study investigates how classroom interactions construct and sustain linguistic power. Data were collected from four Senior High Schools in the Ashanti region, chosen for their accessibility and proximity. The study involved eighty (80) participants, comprising eighteen (18) students and two (2) language teachers from each school. Data collection instruments included semi-structured interviews and participant observation. All interviews were recorded, transcribed verbatim, and analyzed using an iterative coding process to identify recurring themes and patterns. The study revealed that language teachers often functioned as gatekeepers and enforcers of the official language policy, adversely affecting students and causing feelings of shame, anxiety, and isolation. A notable finding from the study was that school administrators and teachers equated English proficiency with innocence while viewing the use of indigenous languages as a sign of guilt. The study concluded that power dynamics in the classroom have detrimental effects on students, leading to the suppression of their linguistic rights. These dynamics not only affect students' emotional and psychological well-being but also their overall educational experiences, emphasizing the urgent need for a more inclusive and equitable language policy in Ghanaian Senior High Schools.

Keywords: *Ghana, Indigenous languages, Linguistic rights, Mother-tongue, Power*

[1] Corresponding author: Naima Sahli: naima.sahli@univ-tiaret.dz

Introduction

In numerous postcolonial societies, the selection of instructional language remains a reflection of historical power dynamics and social hierarchies. In Ghana, the influence of language on identity and heritage is significant, with over seventy (70) indigenous languages in use (Owu-Ewie & Eshun, 2019). Despite gaining independence, English has become the dominant language of instruction from Basic Three onward, highlighting the enduring legacy of colonialism (Cobarrubias, 1983). This preference for English has resulted in the marginalization of indigenous languages, affecting the effective delivery and reception of education among students from diverse linguistic backgrounds (Owu-Ewie, 2009; Owu-Ewie & Edu-Buandoh, 2014). The historical prevalence of English in education continues to shape language policy and power dynamics in today's classrooms, inadvertently privileging English while marginalizing indigenous languages (Spolsky, 2004). The strict adherence to English in classrooms, along with the requirement for students to seek permission to use their native languages, reflects institutional policies instituted by the Ghana Education Service (Edu-Buandoh & Otchere, 2012; Owu-Ewie & Edu-Buandoh, 2014).

The 1992 Constitution of Ghana recognizes the country's linguistic diversity and includes provisions for linguistic rights in education. Specifically, Article 39(3) states that "the State shall foster the development of Ghanaian languages and pride in Ghanaian culture." This constitutional commitment is further supported by Ghana's language-in-education policy, which mandates that children be instructed in their mother tongue or another familiar Ghanaian language during the first three years of primary school (Owu-Ewie & Eshun, 2015), after which English becomes the primary medium of instruction. However, in practice, the responsibility for implementing this policy lies with the Ghana Education Service (GES), which oversees the coordination and execution of all pre-tertiary education programs and policies. Through its Code of Conduct for Teaching Staff, the GES subtly promotes the use of English among students, thereby reinforcing its status as the language of authority and academic legitimacy (G.E.S. Code of Conduct for Teaching Staff, 2017). This institutional directive places classroom teachers at the forefront of enforcing language policies, thereby reinforcing the perceived dominance of English over indigenous languages in educational settings. Moreover, the prioritization of English proficiency in educational settings is associated with academic success and social acceptance, placing students proficient in indigenous languages at a disadvantage (Asilevi, 2011; Owu-Ewie & Edu-Buandoh, 2014). The existing power dynamics at play pose significant challenges for students in exercising their linguistic rights, embracing their cultural identities, and securing equitable access to educational opportunities (Phillipson & Skutnabb-Kangas, 1995; Wee, 2011).

While previous research has investigated language policy and its implementation in Ghana, there is limited exploration of how these policies intersect with power dynamics at the classroom level, shaping students' experiences of their linguistic rights. Much of the existing literature focuses on policy analysis or primary education (Bisilki, 2018; Owu-Ewie, 2017), leaving a notable gap in the context of Senior High School and in the perspectives of students themselves. By focusing on classroom interactions, teacher-student relationships, and students' views on language use, this study aims to fill that gap, offering empirical insights into how linguistic rights are negotiated, contested, and, at times, suppressed within Ghanaian Senior High Schools.

Literature Review

This section of the paper looks at language rights. It also focuses on the power dynamics present in language classrooms and the difficulties associated with asserting linguistic rights.

Language Rights in Education

The term "language rights" refers to the rights of individuals and communities to freely choose and utilize their preferred language(s) in various aspects of public and private life, including education, governance, and media, without facing discrimination or marginalization based on their language identity (Brock-Utne, 1992; Hornberger, 1998; Skutnabb-Kangas & Phillipson, 2023; United Nations, 2010). Scholars have focused on outlining the challenges encountered by speakers of minority languages, who often face linguistic discrimination (Phillipson, 2003; Skutnabb-Kangas & Phillipson, 2023; Tupas, 2023). Members of these minority language communities frequently experience discrimination, as their languages are suppressed by dominant groups seeking to eliminate distinctiveness in both public and private spheres, often through forced assimilation (Wee, 2011).

Expanding the discussion on linguistic discrimination, May (2005) identifies three movements associated with the concept of language rights: Language Ecology, Linguistic Human Rights, and Minority Language Rights movements. The Language Ecology movement primarily concerns itself with language preservation and revitalization. The Linguistic Human Rights movement is specifically concerned with linguistic human rights, distinguishing between 'necessary individual rights' and 'necessary collective rights. The former focuses on the right to identify with one's mother tongue, have this identification accepted and respected by others, use the mother tongue in most official situations (including schools), and, if one's mother tongue is not an official language in the country of residence, has the right to become bilingual in both the mother tongue and the official language. The latter ensures that minorities are allowed to maintain their distinct groups, languages, and cultures (Skutnabb-

Kangas, 2000). The Minority Language Rights movement centers on language in ethnically diverse societies, arguing that language rights are needed to ensure equitable relationships between speakers of the dominant and minority languages. This paper aligns more closely with the Linguistic Human Rights (i.e., 'necessary individual rights') movement. Here, language rights are viewed as linguistic rights, and therefore, the two terms are used interchangeably (Paulston, 1997).

In the realm of education, it is crucial to recognize and respect linguistic rights, as overlooking these rights can lead to feelings of inferiority and hinder educational achievement (Phillipson & Skutnabb-Kangas, 1995). Research consistently shows that students achieve the best learning outcomes when taught in their native languages. This approach enhances comprehension, cognitive development, and academic performance (Adongo & Nsoh, 2023; Hurwitz & Kambel, 2020), improving their ability to grasp complex concepts and actively engage in learning. This, in turn, improves the overall quality of education and reduces dropout rates (Bisilki, 2018). Furthermore, education in a native language empowers students by validating their cultural and linguistic identity, nurturing self-esteem, and building the confidence crucial for personal and academic growth. In Ghana, English is primarily employed as the language of instruction, particularly in Senior High Schools. This practice leads to the discrimination and marginalization of students who are only proficient in their indigenous languages. Conversely, students whose mother tongues are incorporated into the curriculum or are commonly spoken in their communities, frequently those who speak dominant local languages, tend to navigate this linguistic landscape more comfortably. In contrast, those from minority language backgrounds face an additional disadvantage, as their native languages are often excluded from the school curriculum and undervalued in formal educational settings. Promoting linguistic rights in the classroom would empower students to confidently use their native languages without the fear of negative repercussions, as noted by Paulston (1997).

Given Ghana's historical ties as a former British colony and the enduring significance of English in contemporary society, emphasizing bilingual education policies is crucial. This is especially applicable to nations with colonial legacies, where incorporating students' native languages into the curriculum is essential (Ofosu-Dwamena, 2019; Opoku-Amankwaa, Edu-Buandoh, & Brew-Hammond, 2015). By doing so, students can benefit from the cognitive and social advantages of bilingualism, thereby affirming their linguistic rights through their mother tongue while gaining proficiency in English.

Taken together, the studies have outlined the significance of mother tongue–based education while also revealing tensions regarding the conceptualization and implementation of linguistic rights. Some research (Skutnabb-Kangas & Phillipson, 2023; Tupas, 2023) emphasizes the themes of rights,

identity, and equity, whereas other scholars point to the structural and political limitations that impede the realization of these rights in practice. Although research advocating for bilingual or mother tongue instruction aligns with Ghana's policy ideals, it contrasts with findings that demonstrate the continued dominance of English in educational settings, which marginalizes local languages. This contradiction emphasizes a persistent divide between international rights-based frameworks and the actual practices observed in schools and classrooms. These tensions set the stage for a deeper exploration of how such inequities are perpetuated through power dynamics within the classroom.

Power Dynamics in the Language Classroom

The language classroom can be seen as a representation of broader societal structures that embody the ideologies, expectations, and perceptions influenced by the larger society (May, 2014; Mayr, 2015). Power dynamics significantly influence interactions between teachers and students within the educational setting, ultimately shaping educational outcomes. Extensive research over the years has concentrated on power relations within the classroom, with a specific focus on the dynamics between teachers and students (Canagarajah & Said, 2011; Kearney, Plax, Richmond, & McCroskey, 1984).

Erickson (1986) argues that teachers hold legitimate power in the classroom due to their institutional position and superior knowledge of the subject matter. Teachers exert their power through curriculum decisions, classroom management, and assessments. Kearney et al. (1984) support Erickson's assertion by affirming that teachers have the capacity to influence students to engage in activities they might not have undertaken without such influence. This underscores the teacher's role in shaping student behavior through their authority, highlighting the inherent power dynamics present in the educational process. Nevertheless, power in the classroom is not solely about the teacher governing students; rather, it involves dynamic, interactive relationships. Students also exert power through their active participation and by resisting the acquisition of the teacher's intended knowledge. This resistance can shift the dynamics of interaction, constitute a form of power and challenge the authority of the teacher, thus recognizing students' capacity to influence the educational process.

Apart from the teacher-student relationship in classrooms involving power dynamics, the language used for instruction and communication further exemplifies power structures (Brock-Utne, 2001, 2020). Language in the classroom functions as a complex tool of both empowerment and oppression, closely linked to power dynamics. The selection of language by educators and learners can either empower students by validating their linguistic identities or perpetuate linguistic biases and discrimination (Simpson, Mayr & Statham, 2019). For instance, within many educational settings in Ghana, English, as the dominant language, often takes precedence over minority indigenous languages,

thus reinforcing existing power differentials and marginalizing students who speak non-dominant languages. Furthermore, language serves as a gatekeeping mechanism, in which proficiency in specific languages symbolizes privilege and is a key to accessing opportunities (Asilevi, 2011).

Upon critical examination, it becomes apparent that the classroom is far from neutral due to the inherent power dynamics. Often, teachers, without conscious awareness, contribute to perpetuating these power imbalances by favoring the use of the dominant language in their interactions with students (Freire, 1972).

These studies demonstrate that power dynamics in the language classroom are both structural and relational, functioning through teacher authority, student participation, and the selection of instructional language. While earlier research emphasizes the teacher's role in shaping classroom behavior (Erickson, 1986; Kearney et al., 1984), more recent studies (Brock-Utne, 2020; Simpson, Mayr, & Statham, 2019) highlight how language choices can either reinforce or challenge these power relations, particularly in multilingual and postcolonial contexts. These dynamics directly affect students' ability to exercise their linguistic rights, exposing ongoing inequities between speakers of dominant and minority languages.

Challenges and Barriers to Exercising Linguistic Rights

Ghana is committed to embracing international, regional, and national laws that endorse the use of the mother tongue as a medium of instruction in educational institutions (Owu-Ewie, 2017). However, the practical application of this commitment encounters several challenges and barriers within senior high schools, impacting students' academic performance and cultural identity.

Bisilki (2018) identifies the gap between policy and practice as a primary obstacle to exercising linguistic rights. Despite existing policies favoring the use of mother tongues in education, their implementation remains inconsistent and superficial. The Ghana Education Service's guidelines supporting the use of local languages in early education lose momentum as students' progress to higher levels, leading to the predominance of English as the medium of instruction at the senior high school level. This marginalizes indigenous languages and restricts students' opportunities to learn in their first language. Another significant challenge is the lack of trained language teachers proficient in both subject matter and students' mother tongues. The lack of proper training programs emphasizing bilingual education contributes to this issue, further exacerbated by the absence of continuous professional development opportunities for teachers in mother tongue instruction (Opoku-Amankwaa, Edu-Buandoh & Brew-Hammond, 2015). Additionally, societal attitudes towards local languages are crucial to the challenges faced. Some educators, parents, and policymakers believe that proficiency in

English is essential for academic and professional success, undermining the value of local languages in educational settings and perpetuating their underutilization (Owu-Ewie & Edu-Buandoh, 2014). This, in turn, results in social and academic disadvantages for students attempting to exercise their linguistic rights.

Ghana's rich linguistic diversity (Owu-Ewie & Eshun, 2019) presents both opportunities and challenges. While this diversity is a cultural asset, it complicates the implementation of a standardized policy on mother-tongue instruction, often leading to the exclusion of indigenous languages due to contentious language selection and political implications (Bamgbose, 2000). Moreover, examination and assessment systems in Ghanaian Senior High Schools, predominantly conducted in English, can disadvantage students proficient in their mother tongue, as their comprehension and articulation in English may not accurately reflect their knowledge and capabilities. This emphasizes English in high-stakes testing, perpetuating the marginalization of local languages and sustaining the cycle of linguistic disadvantage (Amankwah, 2020). Urban-rural disparities also influence the effective exercise of linguistic rights, with urban schools having greater access to resources, trained teachers, and support for English-medium instruction than rural schools, thereby intensifying educational inequality (Trudell, 2016).

Recent studies (Tupas, 2024; Waschak, 2025) affirm that these barriers continue to exist, revealing that, despite established policy frameworks, students' linguistic rights are unevenly realized across different schools. These studies emphasize that challenges related to policy implementation, teacher capacity, societal attitudes, assessment systems, and resource allocation collectively perpetuate a cycle of linguistic disadvantage.

Collectively, the evidence underscores the ongoing disparity between Ghana's policy commitments and the realities faced in classrooms. These issues present a clear rationale for this study, which investigates how power dynamics and language policies in Senior High Schools influence students' ability to exercise their linguistic rights. To address this gap, the study employs Linguistic Human Rights theory for understanding the interconnections between language, power, and student agency in Ghanaian Senior High Schools.

Theoretical framework

Linguistic Human Rights Theory

Linguistic Human Rights Theory by Skutnabb-Kangas and Phillipson (1995) highlights the right to preserve and utilize one's native language. In countries with linguistic diversity, language regulation is essential to address concerns related to language dominance. This regulation is often established

when a linguistic community perceives a threat to its language from others. Governments respond to these challenges by creating legal frameworks that define the official and public use of languages, particularly in law, administration, and education. These linguistic human rights are the foundation for the promotion, protection, and study of recognized languages within a specific jurisdiction.

Owu-Ewie's (2017) exposition on Linguistic Human Rights delineates three fundamental approaches: the Liberal Multiculturalist Approach (Patten, 2003), the Liberal Neutralist Approach (Levy, 2000), and the Democratic Liberal Approach (Valadez, 2001). These approaches provide distinct perspectives on the recognition and support of minority languages within a multilingual society. The Liberal Multiculturalist Approach, advocated by Patten (2003), emphasizes the equitable recognition of minority languages within a liberal state, based on principles of fairness, individual and cultural identity, and equal access to opportunities. Fair treatment of all languages, including minority languages, in public institutions, services, and businesses is essential. Recognizing minority languages supports individual and cultural identity, important for one's sense of self and community. Using minority languages in public domains provides equal opportunities for all citizens. The Liberal Neutralist Approach, as described by Levy (2000), stresses the practical advantages of adopting a common language in a society that has multiple languages. It posits that a common language ensures equal access to opportunities for all citizens, facilitates effective participation in political processes, and contributes to the efficient functioning and stability of state institutions. For example, the language policy of education in Ghana aligns with this approach, with English serving as the official language and only eleven (11) indigenous languages being promoted, while others are marginalized. English is prioritized over potentially at the expense of indigenous languages. The Democratic Liberal Approach, proposed by Valadez (2001), emphasizes the importance of fostering mutual understanding and participation among diverse cultural groups. Language is viewed as a tool to familiarize citizens with each other's beliefs and perspectives, promoting mutual understanding. All language groups should have equal opportunities to participate in shared institutions, which contradicts the education language policy in Ghana, as most indigenous languages have been excluded from the curriculum (Owu-Ewie, 2017).

This study primarily utilizes Owu-Ewie's (2017) elaboration of the Linguistic Human Rights (LHR) theory, which builds upon the foundational ideas introduced by Skutnabb-Kangas and Phillipson (1995). It specifically applies the Liberal Multiculturalist and Democratic Liberal interpretations of this framework, as these perspectives align closely with the study's emphasis on linguistic equity, inclusion, and participation in Ghanaian Senior High Schools. In contrast, the Liberal Neutralist approach is employed as an alternative ideological stance, highlighting the dominance of English within the Ghanaian educational system and its implications for students' linguistic rights.

Consequently, the framework provides an interpretive foundation for analyzing emergent themes from the data.

Methodology

This study utilized a qualitative design and relied solely on primary data. Data were collected from four senior high schools across three districts in the Ashanti region. These schools were selected based on their accessibility and proximity to the researchers (Amoah & Eshun, 2015). The study included a total of eighty (80) participants, comprising eighteen (18) students and two (2) language teachers from each school. The purposive sampling technique was employed to select participants, considering the diverse linguistic backgrounds of students in Ghanaian senior high schools, where admission is contingent on academic merit and individual preference. Students were purposely selected to ensure representation from varied linguistic backgrounds, while language teachers were chosen based on their willingness to participate in the study. Two instruments were used for data collection: semi-structured interviews with teachers and students, and participant observation. Students were interviewed in a focus group comprising nine members, while the two (2) teachers were interviewed jointly. This approach was to create a supportive and less intimidating environment to mitigate any fear of mockery or victimization, thus encouraging more candid and open participation. Additionally, participant observation was utilized to gain insights into the power dynamics between teachers and students regarding language use. This approach provided additional perspectives that may not have been uncovered through interviews alone. Reflexivity was maintained through regular journaling and team discussions, critically examining how the researchers' presence and perspectives might affect data collection and interpretation. Efforts were also made to minimize the impact of the researchers' presence on participants' natural behavior. Researchers spent time in the classrooms before formal data collection to build rapport and allow participants to become accustomed to their presence, thereby reducing potential reactivity. Observations were conducted unobtrusively, and researchers refrained from interacting with participants during observation sessions to capture more authentic behaviors and interactions. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, ensuring they were fully aware of the study's purpose, potential risks, and their right to withdraw without any repercussions. Confidentiality and anonymity were strictly maintained to protect participants' identities and personal information. Pseudonyms were used in the transcriptions. Additionally, efforts were made to ensure that the data collection process did not disrupt the normal functioning of the schools or place any undue burden on the participants. Interviews were audio-recorded with participants' consent, transcribed verbatim, and inductively coded to identify recurrent themes and patterns within the data. The codes

were then refined and organized into overarching themes through constant comparison, ensuring that the analysis remained grounded in participants' perspectives. For instance, statements about students being silenced or ignored by teachers were initially coded under 'voice,' while discussions about the enforcement of English-only policies were coded under 'authority.' Over time, related codes were grouped into overarching themes.

Two main research questions guide this study:

a. What challenges do students face when exercising their linguistic rights in senior high schools?

b. How do power dynamics within the language classroom affect students' ability to exercise their linguistic rights in senior high schools?

Results and Discussion

This section of the study answers the main research questions posed.

What challenges do students face when exercising their linguistic rights in senior high schools?

This research question aimed to investigate the challenges and barriers Senior High School students face when exercising their linguistic rights in school. Responses from the participants revealed that students encounter challenges when attempting to exercise their linguistic rights. The following statements gathered from the interviews with students and teachers indicated specific challenges and barriers that hinder students' use of their preferred language at the senior high school level:

> *...you will be punished because you are not allowed to speak Twi in the class. So, when you speak Twi in class, they [teachers] will punish you or give you some work to do.* (SAS1)

A second-year student affirmed this when she said:

> *I was punished to write, "I won't speak Twi again in class". I was to write a whole big notebook.* (SCS4)

Another student from School B also said:

> *As soon as you start using the [indigenous] language, the teacher will let you stop. The teacher will say, 'Use the English language to answer the question'.* (SBS2)

These statements were confirmed by a teacher in school A.

> *Since this is an institution, English as the official language must be used during instructional periods. When a child uses a preferred language apart from the English language, automatically that child will be punished*. (SAT1)

These disciplinary practices demonstrate that English is strictly upheld as the primary

instructional language within educational settings. This positions language teachers as both gatekeepers and enforcers of the official language policy in the academic environment. Such enforcement constrains students' ability to utilize their preferred languages and reflects systemic power dynamics that privilege English proficiency over mother-tongue communication (Skutnabb-Kangas & Phillipson, 1995). This is consistent with Onwutalobi's (2024) study conducted in Nigerian primary and secondary schools, where the emphasis on English proficiency often undermines the use of indigenous languages.

The study also revealed that, in addition to serving as gatekeepers, language teachers' attitudes and behaviors also hindered students from using their preferred language, as evidenced by a comment made by a first-year student:

> *if you are fluent in the speaking of English, the teacher likes you, but when you can't speak well, the teacher will ignore you every day*. (SBS1)

A teacher from school A also indicated,

> *I shout at them and shut them down and tell them to speak in English. So, you will realize that once you ask them to speak in English, you mute them completely*. (SAT2)

Another teacher also indicated,

> *Frankly speaking, as a teacher of English, I am always strict on the use of the English language during classroom discussions, and when that happens, only a few students become interactive.* (SBT1)

The excerpts, confirmed by classroom observations, reveal that language proficiency establishes a hierarchy among students, favoring those who are fluent in English while marginalizing others. Throughout the data collection process, it became evident that language teachers primarily engaged with students proficient in English, unintentionally overlooking certain segments of the class during discussions. This pattern, consistently observed during the researcher's time in the schools, mirrors broader power structures in Ghanaian education, where colonial legacies and the societal value placed on English continue to influence student-teacher interactions.

Disturbingly, the data revealed instances of language teachers requesting money from students when they spoke their preferred languages. This not only poses financial challenges for the students but also discourages the use of their preferred languages. A first-year student expressed this concern in a statement.

> *Even the teachers choose some people [students] on campus, if they hear you speaking Twi, they will write your name. Later, they[teachers] will collect you*

[sic] one cedi. (SAS2)

Strikingly, language teachers' marginalization of non-English-speaking students was not confined to the classroom. Students who communicated in their preferred languages were sometimes overlooked. This was expressed in a response from a third-year student at School C:

> *My friend and I were fighting. So, I went to the teacher to report my friend. When I went, I was not able to use the English language to express myself very well. So, I tried to use the Twi. When I started, he sacked me and said I should go; he is not going to listen to what I have to say if I can't express myself in English*. (SCS4)

A language teacher interviewed confirmed this when he said,

> *As a language teacher, you are expected to carry the language everywhere and every time. So, you are being looked up to during classroom instruction and outside the classroom. A student cannot come to me and speak Twi; I will sack you. I can't encourage other languages aside from the English language.* (SDT1)

In all the senior high schools included in this study, it was observed that none had displayed the usual "SPEAK ENGLISH ONLY" signage on their walls, as is commonly seen in other educational institutions. This stands in contrast to the observations made by Owu-Ewie and Edu-Buandoh (2014) in their study, where they reported encountering signs such as "SPEAK ENGLISH ONLY," "SPEAK ENGLISH," "SPEAKING GHANAIAN LANGUAGE IS PROHIBITED," and "DO NOT SPEAK VERNACULAR." Nevertheless, the study revealed that despite the absence of such inscriptions, the students had fully embraced the English-only policy as the school's language policy through acculturation. A first-year student indicated,

> *For me, my first day in this school, I realized that all the students were speaking English. So, I couldn't speak my preferred language.* (SCS4)

Another first-year student confirms this statement.

> *In this school, if you don't do elective French or elective Twi, don't bother yourself to speak Twi. The only preferred language is English. So, if you are walking on campus, you can't talk, you are quiet.* (SBS2)

The study further revealed that students are hesitant to use their preferred languages in school due to the apprehension of being assessed in English, despite finding it challenging to express themselves in English. A third-year student at school B echoed this sentiment:

> *when you speak Twi always, it makes the subjects difficult for you, especially*

when writing essays during exams. (SBS5)

Another student indicated:

... in the long run, our final exams are going to be in English, so if you continuously speak the native language, which is our preferred language, it is not going to help you. (SAS3)

The data indicate that students express concern about the potential stigma of being perceived as uncivilized or illiterate and the fear of being given derogatory nicknames or being laughed at. As a result, this apprehension discourages them from using their preferred languages in school environments. This is expressed in a statement by a second-year student.

You know, at our place, when you finish cooking and you want to serve, we say 'kwantere'(ladle). So, at the dining hall, I told one of the girls that "fa kwantere no m'ame" (take the ladle for me). The girl said, "You are uncivilized". I became sad the whole day. (SCS4)

A first-year student also confirmed this statement as she said:

when I speak Twi in class, some students make fun of me. (SAS2)

Another first-year student affirmed the statements as he said:

One time, a teacher came to class to teach. He pointed to a friend to answer a question and my friend spoke typical Twi. As soon as he started the whole class burst into laughter including the teacher. I was expecting the teacher to tell the class to stop laughing. (SDS1)

The aforementioned statements regarding the stigmatization of students for speaking their preferred languages and receiving derogatory labels in school agree with previous research conducted by Owu-Ewie and Edu-Buandoh (2014). Their research revealed a perception among some individuals that Ghanaian languages are uncivilized and backward, leading to disrespect toward those who speak them. Therefore, students studying Ghanaian languages were unfairly accused of being uncivilized.

An interesting finding from the data reveals that school administrators and teachers tend to link English proficiency with innocence and view the use of indigenous languages as a sign of guilt. A student who is fluent in English is consistently perceived as innocent and is spared punishment, while a student who is not proficient in English and uses their indigenous language is often perceived as the wrongdoer or found guilty of the offence. This observation was shared by a second-year student from school D.

When you have an issue and you go to the teacher, the one whose preferred language is English will be able to express him or herself well, and when you

> *fail to use the English language to express yourself, they will say that you are the one lying. Meanwhile, you are not the one lying. It is bad.* (SDS3)

A third-year student in school B confirmed this as he said,

> *We were to face the school authorities for fighting. And when we faced them, the school authorities questioned us in English, but I tried to express myself in Twi, which they ban[sic] me not to speak Twi. I was not to be blamed, but because I was not able to speak English, I was blamed for the fault*. (SBS2)

Although the first research question was to examine the challenges that students encounter when asserting their linguistic rights in school, certain compelling findings emerged from the data that piqued the researchers' interest. The researchers observed that when students were punished for using their preferred languages, it caused them significant emotional and psychological distress, leading to feelings of shame, anxiety, and isolation. This indicates that violations of linguistic rights extend beyond classroom participation and affect students' well-being and sense of inclusion.

Research question 2: How do power dynamics within the language classroom affect students' ability to exercise their linguistic rights in senior high schools?

This section seeks to investigate the impact of power dynamics within the language classroom on the assertion of linguistic rights by Senior High School students. The study leveraged themes such as mastery, voice, authority, and positionality, as identified in prior research on classroom power dynamics (Maher & Tetreault, 1994), to structure the findings. The study revealed that power dynamics in the language classroom had negative impact on students, resulting in the suppression of their linguistic rights.

Mastery

The theme of mastery centers on students' comprehension of the subject matter and their acquisition of knowledge (Maher & Tetreault, 1994). Interview data from both students and teachers indicate the existence of power dynamics in the language classroom. These power dynamics significantly impact students' ability to assert their linguistic rights to use and receive education in their preferred languages, thereby influencing their learning experiences and impeding the learning process. A third-year student expressed this sentiment in a statement.

> *Those of us who have a bad background in the English language, we are*

unable to participate in class. We find it difficult to understand and answer questions in class. (SCS3)

Another third-year student in school B pointed out that,

Speaking English is very hard for us. So, we will be sitting down and we will be waiting for someone to answer the teacher's question. Sometimes, we understand what he is trying to say, but speaking English is the problem. (SBS2)

A teacher confirms these statements as he says:

At times during teaching, when you explain concepts to students, they find it very difficult to get an understanding of it, but the moment you switch the language to Twi, then you see that they will start contributing. (SCT1)

He added,

One afternoon, we were looking at the Weaver Bird poem. During the introduction to the poem, using English, I could see that the students' facial expression tells me they don't understand the concept. So, I switched to Twi, come and see. (SCT1)

Another teacher in school C added that,

During exams, I see that concepts that we engage students in Twi, they are able to score higher than those we use the English language. (SCT2)

He further added,

I think the use of English throughout the lesson affects students' understanding. That is why we teach more, but we have low performance in our school. (SCT2)

These excerpts demonstrate how the exclusive use of English limits mastery, perpetuating inequities among students and favoring those who are proficient in English. This perspective aligns with the argument put forth by Adongo and Nsoh (2023), which posits that honoring students' linguistic rights by incorporating their preferred languages during classroom instruction significantly enhances learning, more so than relying solely on a second language such as English. Furthermore, this trend underscores a systemic issue: the dominance of English in Ghanaian education continues despite students' ability to fully engage when allowed to use their indigenous languages. Embracing these languages not only deepens students' understanding and mastery of the subject matter but also affirms their linguistic identities, thereby empowering them.

Voice

The theme of linguistic self-expression, commonly called "voice," emerged in the data. It captures students' ability to express themselves in the classroom. The analysis of interview data revealed that students felt a sense of negativity and insignificance when they were unable to freely express their thoughts in their preferred languages due to restrictive power dynamics.

One interviewee highlighted how power dynamics impeded his full participation and sense of worth within the academic environment:

> *I went to the vetting room for a position. The question was coming in English. So, I couldn't express myself. If it were Twi, I could say something. I was disqualified because of English. So, I was sad.* (SAS3)

A second-year student indicated that

> *Our teacher asked us to do a presentation. When we were about to do it, one of my friends was not able to express herself in English. So, the teacher said that if she can't speak English, all the group members should stop presenting. We went to sit down; our presentation didn't come on.* (SAS5)

Another second-year student indicated

> *It makes us lonely. Oh, brɔfo no! [Oh, the English]. It makes us quiet and inactive in class.* (SBS2)

He further added,

> *The teachers tell us to speak English and not Twi. So, I cannot express myself in class. I know how to talk, but because of English.* (SBS2)

A teacher confirmed these statements as he said:

> *I ask students to speak English only in my class. Those who are good in English contribute their quota and express themselves. But some who can't speak English are always dull and silent, and I think they are just minding their business*. (SCT2)

The excerpts demonstrate how restrictive language policies in the classroom can silence students, particularly marginalizing those who are less proficient in English and creating a sense of invisibility. This phenomenon directly connects to Skutnabb-Kangas and Phillipson's (1995) theory of Linguistic Human Rights, which underscores the importance of students' rights to express themselves in their preferred language without the fear of being marginalized.

Authority

The theme of authority in the classroom focuses on who holds power and how it is exercised. Traditionally, teachers wield significant influence in shaping the classroom atmosphere and establishing language protocols. An examination of the data indicates that teachers commonly prioritize English, the dominant language, which leads to students who are fluent in indigenous languages feeling marginalized.

> *When my teacher speaks Twi to me in class and I respond in Twi, he will say that you are a student, so speak English. We are not the same and insults me*. (SBS4)

A student in school C added:

> *I tried to ask a question the other time, and the madam told me to sit down. She said I should not use Twi in the classroom again, and she also said wo bƐte ta ƐwƆ w'asum, wo bƐwai no na ƐyƐ me nsa [literally, you will hear a sound in your ear, and when you remove it, you'll find that it's my hand]*. (SCS3)

A first-year student said

> *The other day, I was answering a question, but the English was not coming. So, I said to the teacher, ' Sir, please, can I speak Twi?'. He said, "My friend, sit down, sit down. The next time you speak Twi in my class, I will walk you out".* (SAS5)

Another second-year student in school C confirmed

> *Last time, my teacher said something to me in class, but I didn't hear it. I asked him in Twi what he said. Then, he got angry and said, "I am speaking English and you're speaking Twi to me, you don't respect, eh?"*. (SCS4)

These excerpts reveal the power imbalances present in the language classroom, where teachers wield their authority to enforce English as the dominant language, thereby marginalizing students who speak indigenous languages. By prioritizing English, teachers not only control classroom participation but also signal which forms of linguistic expression are deemed socially acceptable, reinforcing existing hierarchies of language. This suppression of students' preferred languages restricts their ability to communicate effectively, engage fully, and assert their linguistic rights. Such practices reflect broader systemic pressures, including national language policies and societal valorization of English, positioning teachers as enforcers of these norms. Consequently, authority in the classroom becomes a mechanism through which students' linguistic identities are constrained and their rights curtailed.

Positionality

The theme of positionality refers to the placement of educators within larger societal constructs that establish norms and expectations (Maher & Tetreault, 1994). The roles adopted by teachers within the education system significantly influence their attitudes towards linguistic rights. The data indicate situations wherein educators adhere to predominant language standards as dictated by educational policies, thereby marginalizing students who speak non-dominant languages.

A teacher in school A indicated that

> *... when I see the headmaster or any of my superiors, at that moment, no matter who you are, I will never allow you to express yourself using your preferred language.* (SAT1)

He further added,

> *These [language] policies do not tell me what to do to help the child; rather, I am to strictly base on what the policy demands as an English language teacher.* (SAT1)

Another teacher confirmed the statement

> *... you [language teacher] are to speak the language so that your students will emulate you. As an English language teacher, you can't encourage other languages. What will people say about you?* (SBT2)

A teacher in school A also shared his view

> *How will it look like when I have written English [a subject] on the board and I am speaking Twi in class? Imagine the headmaster, a colleague teacher, or anybody from the Education office passing by and noticing it. What will they think of me?* (SAT2)

The accounts illustrate how teachers' adherence to institutional norms reinforces the dominance of English while marginalizing students' preferred languages. Their position within the school hierarchy, subject to the scrutiny of superiors, colleagues, and education officials, contributes to their stringent enforcement of English, often at the cost of students' linguistic rights. This indicates that teachers are not merely individual enforcers of language policies; rather, they are embedded in systemic structures that perpetuate language hierarchies. As a result, students' use of indigenous languages is restricted not only by classroom authority but also by broader institutional expectations. These findings underscore how the interplay between teacher positionality and policy pressures perpetuates unequal power dynamics, thereby limiting students' agency and participation in the classroom.

The discussion so far reveals a consistent pattern across mastery, voice, authority, and positionality: students' linguistic rights are often suppressed due to power dynamics within the classroom, which privilege English while marginalizing indigenous languages. These dynamics impact comprehension, participation, confidence, and identity, demonstrating how classroom practices can reinforce broader societal hierarchies in language use. Integrating LHR theory, the findings underscore that such practices violate students' rights to use their preferred language in educational settings, leading to negative consequences for both learning outcomes and socio-emotional well-being.

Policy Implications

The findings of this study underscore the pressing need for policy reforms that acknowledge linguistic diversity as fundamental to fostering equitable teaching and learning in senior high schools in Ghana. Firstly, the Ministry of Education and the Ghana Education Service (GES) should clearly define the role of indigenous languages within secondary education to prevent the misinterpretation of language-in-education policies as mandates for English-only classroom practices. Establishing explicit guidelines that authorize the structured use of Ghanaian languages, especially for explanations, scaffolding, and assessment support, would help alleviate the exclusionary effects faced by students. Secondly, teacher education programs should include modules on linguistic rights, sociolinguistic equity, and translanguaging pedagogies to better prepare teachers for managing multilingual classrooms without resorting to punitive enforcement of English. Such training would help alter teachers' perceptions that utilizing indigenous languages signifies a lack of professionalism or diminished authority. Thirdly, Institutional practices that penalize students for speaking their preferred languages should be reassessed and replaced with supportive, culturally responsive approaches. Finally, policy monitoring and supervision should prioritize inclusive language practices instead of strict adherence to narrow interpretations of English-only norms. This would help ensure that school culture aligns with national commitments to equity, access, and the linguistic rights of students.

Conclusion

This study explored how language choices and power dynamics within senior high school classrooms influence students' ability to assert their linguistic rights. The findings reveal that teachers, whether deliberately or inadvertently, serve as gatekeepers of the English-only ideology, frequently enforcing policies that restrict students from using their preferred languages. Such practices can lead to emotional distress, silence students, and undermine their participation and learning experiences. Power dynamics related to mastery, voice, authority, and positionality further marginalize students who either lack

proficiency in English or rely on indigenous languages for understanding. The study concludes that power-laden language practices negatively affect students' academic engagement and their capacity to exercise their linguistic rights. Future research could expand on these insights by investigating how linguistic rights function across various regions of Ghana to identify whether similar power dynamics arise in different sociolinguistic contexts. Furthermore, comparative studies across other multilingual African countries could illuminate both common challenges and context-specific solutions.

Funding

The researchers received no funding sources.

Informed Consent Statement

Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

References

Adongo, H. A., & Nsoh, A. E. (2023). Legislating mother tongue education in Ghana. *Ghana Journal of Education and Teaching, 2*(1), 55–77.

Amankwah, P. A. (2020). *Factors influencing low academic performance in English, maths and science in the 2018 WASSCE examination: A case study of Shama Senior High School* [Unpublished master's thesis]. Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology.

Asilevi, F. (2011). *Sociolinguistics and pragmatics*. Institute for Educational Development and Extension.

Bamgbose, A. (1991). *Language and the nation: The language question in Sub-Saharan Africa*. Edinburgh University Press.

Bamgbose, A. (2000). *Language and exclusion*. Transaction Publishers.

Bisilki, A. K. (2018). The dilemmas of bilingual education in rural Ghana: A case study of the Nkwanta North District. *Legon Journal of the Humanities, 29*(2), 146–175.

Brock-Utne, B. (1992, July 27–31). *Linguistic rights as human rights*. Paper presented at the Education for Peace Conference, Kyoto, Japan.

Brock-Utne, B. (2001). Education for all - in whose language? *Oxford Review of Education*, *27*(1), 115–134. https://doi.org/10.1080/03054980125577

Brock-Utne, B. (2020). Language of instruction in Africa: The most important and least appreciated issue. *International Journal of Educational Development in Africa, 1*(1), 4–18.

Canagarajah, S., & Said, S. B. (2011). Linguistic imperialism. In J. Simpson (Ed.), *The Routledge handbook of applied linguistics* (pp. 388–400). Routledge.

Cobarrubias, J. (1983). Ethical issues in status planning. In J. Cobarrubias & J. A. Fishman (Eds.), *Progress in language planning: International perspectives* (pp. 41–85). Mouton de Gruyter.

Edu-Buandoh, D. F., & Otchere, G. (2012). "Speak English!" A prescription or choice of English as a lingua franca in Ghanaian schools. *Linguistics and Education, 23*(3), 301–309.

Erickson, K. A. (1986). *The power of communication: For richer interpersonal relationships*. Concordia Publishing House.

Freire, P. (1972). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. Penguin Books.

Ghana Education Service. (2017). *Code of conduct for staff of the Ghana Education Service*. Ghana Education Service Council.

Hornberger, N. H. (1998). Language policy, language education, language rights: Indigenous, immigrant, and international perspectives. *Language in Society, 27*(4), 439–458.

Hurwitz, D. R., & Kambel, E. R. (2020). Redressing language-based exclusion and punishment in education and the Language Friendly School initiative. *Global Campus Human Rights Journal, 4*(1), 5–24. https://doi.org/20.500.11825/1707

Kearney, P., Plax, T. G., Richmond, V. P., & McCroskey, J. C. (1985). Power in the classroom III: Teacher communication techniques and messages. *Communication Education, 34*(1), 19–28.

Levy, J. T. (2000). *The multiculturalism of fear*. Oxford University Press.

Maher, F., & Tetreault, M. (1994). *The feminist classroom*. Basic Books.

May, S. (2005). Language rights: Moving the debate forward. *Journal of Sociolinguistics, 9*(3), 319–347.

May, S. (2014). Justifying educational language rights. *Review of Research in Education, 38*(1), 215–241.

Mayr, A. (2015). Institutional discourse. In D. Tannen, H. E. Hamilton, & D. Schiffrin (Eds.), *The handbook of discourse analysis* (Vol. 2, pp. 755–774). John Wiley & Sons.

Ofosu-Dwamena, E. (2019). *Policy and practice in early childhood education*. Institute for Distance and e-Learning.

Onwutalobi, A. (2024). The detrimental effects of punishing children for speaking their native

language in schools: a Nigerian case study. *SSRN Electronic Journal*. https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.4769376

Opoku-Amankwa, K., Edu-Buandoh, D. F., & Brew-Hammond, A. (2015). Publishing for mother tongue-based bilingual education in Ghana: Politics and consequences. *Language and Education, 29*(1), 1–14.

Owu-Ewie, C. (2009). The language policy of education in Ghana and linguistic human rights. *Languages and Linguistics, 24*(53), 51–68.

Owu-Ewie, C. (2017). Language, education and linguistic human rights in Ghana. *Legon Journal of the Humanities, 28*(2), 151–172.

Owu-Ewie, C., & Edu-Buandoh, D. F. (2014). Living with negative attitudes towards the study of L1 in Ghanaian senior high schools. *Ghana Journal of Linguistics, 3*(2), 1–25.

Owu-Ewie, C., & Eshun, E. S. (2019). Language representation in the Ghanaian lower primary classroom and its implications: the case of selected schools in the Central and Western Regions of Ghana. *Current Issues in Language Planning*, *20*(4), 365–388. https://doi.org/10.1080/14664208.2019.1585159

Patten, A. (2003). Liberal neutrality and language policy. *Philosophy and Public Affairs, 31*(4), 356–386.

Paulston, C. B. (1997). Language policies and language rights. *Annual Review of Anthropology, 26*(1), 73–85.

Phillipson, R. (2003). *English-only Europe? Challenging language policy*. Routledge.

Phillipson, R., & Skutnabb-Kangas, T. (1995). Linguistic rights and wrongs. *Applied Linguistics, 16*(4), 483–504.

Simpson, P., Mayr, A., & Statham, S. (2019). *Language and power: A resource book for students*. Routledge.

Skutnabb-Kangas, T. (2000). *Linguistic genocide in education or worldwide diversity and human rights?* Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Skutnabb-Kangas, T., & Phillipson, R. (1995). Language rights in post-colonial Africa. In T. Skutnabb-Kangas & R. Phillipson (Eds.), *Linguistic human rights: Overcoming linguistic discrimination* (pp. 335–346). Mouton de Gruyter.

Skutnabb-Kangas, T., & Phillipson, R. (2023). Establishing linguistic human rights. In T. Skutnabb-Kangas & R. Phillipson (Eds.), *The handbook of linguistic human rights* (pp. 1–21). John Wiley & Sons.

Spolsky, B. (2004). *Language policy*. Cambridge University Press.

Trudell, B. (2016). *The impact of language policy and practice on children's learning: Evidence from Eastern and Southern Africa*. UNICEF. https://www.unicef.org/esaro/UNICEF(2016)LanguageandLearningFullReport(SingleView).pdf

Tupas, R. (2023). Linguistic human rights and the imperative to remember in the Philippines. In T. Skutnabb-Kangas & R. Phillipson (Eds.), *The handbook of linguistic human rights* (pp. 649–656). John Wiley & Sons.

Tupas, R. (2024). Unequal Englishes in the linguistic landscape: Tracing desires, ideologies and class through public signs. *Journal of Education, Language, and Ideology, 2*(1), 1–17.

United Nations. (2010). *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*. https://www.un.org/en/documents/udhr

Valadez, J. M. (2001). *Deliberative democracy, political legitimacy, and self-determination in multicultural societies*. Westview Press.

Waschak, L. (2025). Linguistic diversity and language varieties in the European Union: Challenges and opportunities for integration and policy. *MAP Education and Humanities, 6*, 74–80.

Wee, L. (2011). *Language without rights*. Oxford University Press.

Appendix A

Interview Guide for Students

1. **Challenges and Barriers:**
    - What language do you use most often in your classes? How does this affect you?
    - Can you describe any situations where you felt unable to use your preferred language in school?
    - What are some difficulties you face when trying to use your preferred language in school? Can you share specific examples?
    - How do your classmates react when you use your preferred language?
    - How do your teachers respond when you use your preferred language in class or school activities?
    - Are there any school rules about which languages you can use? How do these rules affect you?
    - Have you ever been discouraged from using your preferred language? If so, how?
2. **Power Dynamics**:
    - How do teachers generally respond when students use languages other than the one used for instruction?
    - Can you give an example of a time when a teacher's response to language use made you feel either supported or discouraged?
    - How do you think the rules or expectations about language use affect your ability to participate in class?
    - Do you think all students are treated equally when it comes to using their preferred languages? Why or why not?
    - In what ways do interactions with teachers influence your confidence in using your preferred language?

Appendix B

Interview Guide for Teachers

1. **Challenges and Barriers for Students**:
    - What has been your experience with students using languages other than the primary language of instruction?
    - What challenges do you observe students facing when they use their preferred languages in school?
    - How do you typically respond when students use their preferred languages in class?
    - Are there any formal or informal school policies on language use that you are aware of? How do they impact students?
    - How do you think these policies and practices influence students' ability to exercise their linguistic rights?

2. **Power Dynamics**:
    - How do you view your role in managing language use within the classroom?
    - Can you provide examples of situations where language use led to either a positive or negative classroom environment?
    - How do you manage the balance between maintaining instructional language and supporting students' linguistic preferences?
    - Do you perceive any inequalities among students regarding their ability to use their preferred languages? Why or why not?
    - Do you think some students feel more empowered to use their preferred language than others? Why or why not?
    - How do you address any power imbalances that arise from language use in your classroom?