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TO BE OR NOT TO BE: Codeswitching in the Ghanaian Multilingual Classroom

ABSTRACT

Codeswitching (CS) as a linguistic strategy available to the multilingual teacher in a multilingual classroom is usually undermined despite a good body of literature available outlining its pedagogical relevance. Though some research has been done in Ghana on codeswitching, not much has been done on how the medium of instruction inhibits teachers and learners' efforts in employing CS to bring life into the classroom. This paper has examined the reactions of both teachers and learners towards CS in the Ghanaian multilingual classroom. Accidental ethnography was employed as a method and the research instruments employed were observations and directed conversation. It was revealed that both teachers and learners employ codeswitching because they feel confident and comfortable expressing their ideas. CS is not a predetermined linguistic pedagogical resource but a situational linguistic pedagogical strategy that brings the multilingual classroom to life. Despite that CS brings about linguistic inclusivity and mostly brings the class to life, there are instances of linguistic exclusivity in complex multilingual contexts. Policy makers were considered to be detached from the realities that prevailed in the classroom. This work argues for language policies that are appropriate for African multilingual classroom situation. This work contributes to the discussion of teachers utilising CS in multilingual contexts to meet learners' needs.

Keywords: *codeswitching, Ghanaian multilingual classroom, medium of instruction, directed conversation, accidental ethnography*

Introduction

In a multilingual and a multicultural context, cultural concepts, belief systems and linguistic appropriateness are possibly made meaningful through many linguistic strategies. Paramount among them is codeswitching, an unavoidable linguistic tool, employed in education, politics and even in legal services. The acceptance of codeswitching (CS) as a natural and potentially helpful linguistic strategy is acknowledged by researchers such as Avery (2013) and Ortega (2017). According to Kirkpatrick (2014) CS is a natural means of interacting among bilinguals. It is seen as a sequential action in languages in a multilingual classroom. Besides its naturalistic tendency, the effortlessness that accompanies codeswitching mostly makes it an obvious linguistic strategy available to all categories of bilinguals.

Additionally, codeswitching provides an array of communicative dynamism in several social and

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cultural situations. Despite the numerous linguistic benefits outlined by some researchers (Camilleri, 1998; Cahyani, de Courcy, & Barnett, 2018;) in other contexts in the world especially in the area of education, little attention is given to this seemingly pervasive communicative strategy and linguistic practice in the multilingual Ghanaian classroom especially its usage by teachers in the Ghanaian educational sector. Whilst some teachers view CS positively, others have reservations about the linguistic competence of those who rely on it to explain concepts. It is also not uncommon for teachers to receive queries from their supervisors when they code-switch in the classroom. The supervisors' queries are normally rooted in the medium of instruction language policy of Ghana which, in itself, keeps changing.

The main purpose of this paper is to assess how language policies affect the multilingual learner and to advocate for realistic language practices that empower the multilingual learner to function effectively. The paper seeks to address the following research questions:

1. Under what circumstances do teachers and learners resort to codeswitching as a pedagogical tool in the Ghanaian multilingual classroom?
2. What are the possible impediments against codeswitching in Ghana?

Literature Review

This section reviews literature of peer reviewed articles relevant to the topic of codeswitching in a multilingual context.

Which Way: Policy or Practice

Most African countries are almost always torn between the use of indigenous language or the ex-colonial language: English, French or Portuguese (Ansah, 2014). Some of the practices are described as linguistic genocide. A case in point was the action of the Kenya government in 2000 which banned the use of any other local language in the media except English. The action in itself is a denial of many people from their linguistic rights. One thing that is normally forgotten by the leaders of Africa is the identity crisis created for their people especially in the area of education. The multilingual child, whose experiences are multifaceted, is subtly compelled to rely on a language that appears alien and incapable of making him/her express fully those experiences and concepts.

Aside the learner, the teacher who is expected to implement the policy is confronted with policy and reality. What seems to compound the problem of the teacher as well as the learner is the vacillating nature of the language policy in education (Ansah, 2014; Agbedor, 1994). The vacillating nature of the language-in-education since Sir Gordon Guggisberg's era has made stakeholders in education, especially the curriculum implementers, to be torn between policy and practice. There are instances

where a learner is full of ideas but such a learner more or less is denied to use the language that can best express his/her ideas. The very teacher who denies the learner the opportunity to use his/her mother tongue is heard codeswitching; voluntarily or involuntarily. The willful or unwilful actions of teachers can be attributable to a number of reasons that are yet to be significantly explored in the Ghanaian context.

However, one thing that stands out in African countries about language policy and its implementation is the confusion. Examining the language policies in both South Africa and Tanzania, Brock-Utne & Holmarsdottir (2004) noted as follows: "...the language policies of Tanzania are described as confusing, contradictory, and ambiguous, ...". The challenges normally put the teacher in a fix. Even if they employ an L1, code-mixing or codeswitching as a pedagogical resource, English, in the Anglophone context, becomes the language of examination (Brock-Utne & Holmarsdottir, 2004). How examining bodies in these nations view code-mixing as a linguistic tool in expressing culturally embedded concepts creates further confusion in the minds of teachers.

Furthermore, teachers are often scolded by their superiors if they are found adopting communicative strategies that apparently depart from the medium of instruction policy. To avoid unfavorable comments and possible punishment from superiors, the teacher struggles to explain concepts that could easily be explained through the use of learners' L1. Explanations rendered by teachers finally end up being circuitous. In the name of policy, hurdles are placed in a natural and practical utilization of appropriate linguistic strategies in a second language classroom. Both the teacher and the learner(s) silently suffocate in the name of policy. Should the bilingual/multilingual who has an array of linguistic resources be made to suffer the fate of a mono-lingual? Linguistic rights are called to question when language policies lack respect to learners' choice of language to express themselves. According to Phillipson and Skutnabb-Kangas (1995), one significant right that is upheld by United Nations as an 'inalienable norm Rights' is linguistic human rights. In education, the medium of instruction must give the multilingual learner and educator equal linguistic rights. They reiterate:

...the right to education through the medium of the mother tongue, is seen as a means to contribute to a reduction in societal conflict It is therefore a challenge to applied linguists to see how education systems can contribute to the promotion of more just multilingual societies (Phillipson & Skutnabb-Kangas, 1995:483).

The aim of policies is to practice and, as much as possible, be confusion free. However, language policies and practices in Africa appear more conflicting. Stakeholders in education are left in the balance. What looks realistically practical contravenes set down language policies. CS in Ghana is one practice that apparently goes on in the Ghanaian classroom but that practice departs from the language-in-education policy.

The next section takes a look at the multilingual African classroom and how CS is employed as a linguistic resource.

The Multilingual African Classroom

The use of African languages in complementary and equitable fashion, alongside other languages, will be part of the full development of Africa's own genius and of the continent's search for its own path of development (Robinson, 1996:180).

If the African child has to genuinely develop cognitively, and independently find solutions to the needs of the continent, a language that the African child can relate to has to be the starting point. But to make the African child benefit globally, there is the need to find an alternative way of meeting the African child's language needs in the classroom. This is the point that codeswitching seems to find space that can be functionally effective in the African classroom. As stated by Nelson Mandela, the former South African president, "If you speak to a man in a language he understands, that goes to his head, if you speak to him in his language, that goes to his heart."

The English only medium of instruction in most African multilingual classrooms apparently is a language that finds space in the heads of African learners but does not go to their hearts. In vain teachers might be laboring, and in vain learners might be struggling to make meaning. However, when teachers and learners explore and utilize the linguistic resources available to the multilingual teachers and learners, there is the likelihood of all of them benefitting. Concepts that might appear complex and circuitous can easily be explained; active learners' participation will increase; and there is the possibility of critical thinking and analytical reasoning to be realized. All these benefits are attainable because a language that goes to the learner's heart is employed.

Should the multilingual suffer the same fate of a monolingual? Apparently, no. The multilingual is gifted with an array of linguistic resources. The African multilingual classroom has to properly manage the linguistic resources available to them. The classroom has to be stimulated and that seems possible when African leaders and stakeholders formulate language policies that are relatable and linguistically realistic. Linguistic relativity, according to its proponents, Sarpi-Whorf and others, hold the view that "speakers of different languages think differently" (Wolff and Holmes, 2010:253). Reiterating the different world view, Ludwig Wittgenstein states; "If we spoke a different language, we would perceive a somewhat different world." These differences ought to be catered for when leaders in multilingual contexts have to formulate language policies. Considering that the first language of learners normally becomes the building blocks upon which second language learning occurs (Pandey, 2014; Haspelmath, 2020; Mendívil-Giró, 2021), a familiar language is needed as a medium of instruction for a multilingual classroom.

The multilingual learner needs a language that will not limit their world of thinking. Pandey (2013) quoted Ludwig Wittgenstein as follows to show how language limits people: “The limits of my language mean the limits of my world.” The Ghanaian child sometimes is limited in most of his activities within the classroom because English is used as the medium of instruction. Though some arguments have been advanced for the use of English as a medium of instruction (Mohr & Barasa, 2024; Yallem et al., 2021; Webb, 2004), some researchers within the Ghanaian context have shown that there is usually low learner participation when English-only medium of instruction is strictly followed by teachers; and the use of L1 or a mixture of L1 and L2 yields greater learners’ involvement in classroom activities (Opoku-Amankwa, 2009; Owu-Ewie, 2006; Owu-Ewie & Eshun, 2015).

Having examined CS in a multilingual African classroom, attention is now turned to how people react to codeswitching in multilingual context.

Attitudes and Perceptions of People towards Codeswitching

What we don't want is for young people to be taught in Chinglish rather than either English or Chinese and that's what we are trying to avoid at the moment, said [former] Governor Chris Patten (South China Morning Post, May 13, 1994).

The above quotation by Lin (1996:181) is representative of most colonial governments’ attitudes towards the use of English that seems to depart from what they consider as ‘standard’. This attitude is always carried down and carried out by the colonized. The language alarmists are often quick to criticize people who are using English in a socially realistic context. These criticisms keep promoting negative attitudes and perceptions towards the use of L1 and other forms of communicative strategies that are employed in a second language classroom.

Governments and policy makers, in one way or the other, contribute to the fueling of negative attitudes when innovative strategies are emerging from socially realistic situations. Policy makers appear dogmatic. They hardly examine what was passed on as a policy to them with little or no attention given to the linguistic reality, as well as cultural variations, of the people who are learning a second language. The following quotation suggests how governments take actions to promulgate monolithic ideology of language learning and thereby leading to ill-feeling against what seems to be known as a policy.

“What we must ban in the classroom is mixed-code, commonly known as ‘Chinglish’--that’s not language at all,” Director of Education Helen Yu Lai Ching-ping said (Lin, 1996:181).

Should there not be a variety of English that is relatable to its users? Decisions and actions that are taken to disadvantage a bilingual/multilingual child from grasping concepts taught in a second language classroom is injurious. Literature on the English only medium of instruction points to the fact

that the L1 medium of instruction plays a critical role in the explanation and grasping of concepts (Yip et al., 2003; Cheng, 2022). Based on the importance of the use of L1 medium of instruction, Hong Kong finally implemented a ‘fine-tuning’ language policy that permitted both L1 and L2 medium of instruction to co-exist. Having examined the ‘fine-tuning’ language policy, Cheng (2022) suggests that the English medium of instruction go hand-in-hand with the L1, but the L1 should be used judiciously. The problem that arises is how one can judge what is judicious and what is not. The abuse of the use of L1 in the classroom is seemingly looming. That possibly leads to some of the unfavorable attitudes towards codeswitching.

In Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA), Clegga and Simpson (2016:359) point out the harrowing experiences that learners go through when English is the medium of instruction. They lament: “Pedagogical and organizational expertise appropriate to education for learners working in a second language is available both in Africa and other parts of the world, but rarely widely applied in SSA.” The apparent feet dragging as shown in the quote leads to low performance of learners’ little or no participation in classroom activities and pedagogical language support seems absent. To ease the burden of both the teacher and learners, codeswitch, a combination of African language and English (in the case of the Anglophone Africa) in the SSA classroom becomes a better linguistic alternative.

Within the Ghanaian context, Osei-Boateng’s (2022) work on the perception of teachers on the use of English as a medium of instruction shows that teachers are fully aware of the English medium of instruction; yet, they combine both L1 and L2 in the classroom. He states:

... teachers mostly used bilingual medium of instruction rather than using the L1 as the dominant medium in the ESL classroom as they perceived bilingual education to be most effective in achi[vi]ng their teaching and learning outcomes. Teachers perceived that the L1 plays a significant role in ESL learning. It was suggested that the L1 translation offered learners an easy understanding of the English language, improved learners’ motivation to learn the language, and enhanced learners’ interaction as compared to the use of only the TL/L2 (Osei-Boateng, 2022:2).

From the above, teachers’ pedagogical efforts seem to yield results because an appropriate linguistic approach is employed. Their realistic approach to the situation has produced the desired results such as improved comprehension, effective learners’ involvement in lessons, and increased learner motivation. Since teachers have positive perception and attitude towards the combination of L1 and L2 (codeswitching), it suggests that CS is a useful linguistic resource that teachers in multilingual contexts can employ to attain the needed outcomes. If translation leads to easy understanding of the English language as indicated above, it possibly portrays that both teachers and learners view CS positively. Language is only useful and meaningful when its users benefit from it. CS, in general, cannot be considered subtractive. It is a useful tool in a multilingual classroom and

must be considered as a communicative strategy in education.

In a nutshell, the multilingual child cannot be denied the equal opportunity and the inalienable linguistic human rights to interacting meaningfully, actively and with ease in a multilingual classroom.

Pedagogical Relevance of Codeswitching as a Communicative Strategy

Pedagogy plays an important part in the teaching and learning process. A teacher with a good pedagogy without an appropriate linguistic communicative strategy might find himself/herself being a frustrated professional. However, when a common ground is established through the choice of a language, both teachers and learners are more likely to react positively in the learning process. In other words, when the language used in the classroom is relatable to both the teacher and the learner, they both see the relevance of the activities being carried out in the learning context. CS comes in to play this crucial role in a multilingual classroom.

One of the pedagogical relevance of CS in the Malaysian and Turkish context is portrayed by Lin (2019) and Seedhouse (2005) respectively. They contend that the English medium of instruction is made more accessible when teachers resort to CS. Put differently, concepts that are not easy to grasp are simplified when a language the learner understands is used. Learners sometimes willingly ask teachers if they can use their L1. It appears common to meet students at the Ghanaian pre-tertiary level asking the teacher whether they can use the L1 to answer questions posed by the teacher. Due to policy, it is not surprising that such students are denied the opportunity to speak in a language they think their ideas can be expressed better. The request of students is usually not granted due to some reservations that linger on since students are usually required to use the L2 in examination situations. But it appears far better that learners are able to comprehend concepts and find a way of conveying the idea in the target language than to miss the real concept.

Code-switching, normally, functions as a tool of scaffolding that provides linguistic support in circumstances where no other strategy could help. Across all multilingual contexts, as shown by some researchers, bilingual education scaffolding is a necessary process that allows learners participate actively and fully in content-based knowledge acquisition. Ertugruloglu, Mearns and Admiraal (2023:100550) indicate that supporting language development is an effective way of contributing to “both discipline specific content knowledge and language acquisition.” The pedagogical role of CS as a scaffolding tool in a multilingual classroom context is critical and has to be considered as a pragmatic approach to bringing life in the classroom.

From the Ghanaian context, Yevudey (2013), through classroom observation, questionnaires and interviews established that teachers mostly engage in CS for the purposes of explaining concepts,

correction of pupils' language errors, introduction of new concepts and lessons in general, acknowledging and calling on learners' attention and for facilitating vocabulary acquisition and general understanding. To this end, CS in the classroom pedagogic process certainly is immeasurable in terms of its value in language and content acquisition.

A multilingual classroom is often made of learners with varying degrees of language proficiency. When code-switching is employed, it can foster inclusivity. Learners, whose linguistic repertoire is limited and would have been left out when a familiar language is not used, are more likely included when teachers codeswitch. When a teacher switches to the students' L1, they try to ensure that each learner has the opportunity to participate in the classroom activities. Thus, a sense of belonging is created in each learner since their linguistic identities are recognized. This activity of linguistic validation contributes largely to an inclusive learning environment. Examining linguistic inclusivity, Joubert and de Jong (2023:172) indicate that linguistic inclusivity does not only encompass "just the acknowledgement of the pupils' backgrounds but also the teachers who fear feeling left out by a multilingualism that goes beyond what they are familiar with." CS seems to bridge the gap of being left out in a multilingual classroom.

As much as we acknowledge the pedagogical relevance of CS, there is the need to equally take a look at the challenges that confront its usage. Firstly, language policies are promulgated to favour the monolingual. The socio-cultural, sociolinguistic variants of the multilingual, when brought to play, are mostly considered sub-standard. It is not surprising that some parents and other stakeholders, especially governments kick against the use of L1 alongside the L2.

Secondly, the multiplicity of languages in certain multilingual areas makes it difficult to find a common language for the purposes of codeswitching. There are usually situations that the teacher and the learners do not share a common language. In some cosmopolitan parts of Ghana, studies have revealed classrooms with a mix of children with diverse linguistic backgrounds. It becomes worse when the teacher in the classroom is not proficient in the local language of the community where the school is situated (Yiadom, Anku & Ansah, 2022; Nkrumah & Erinosh, 2024, Owu-Ewie & Eshun, 2019). As much as CS could have assisted both the teacher and the learners, there is apparently a linguistic barrier that prevents the practice of CS. In this jurisdiction where the medium of instruction at the lower primary is the L1, there is a caveat that states that a major Ghanaian language within a locality is used. This caveat seems to compound the issue of linguistic marginalization. Speakers of minority languages are stepped aside and this is affront to the United Nations policy guidelines on minority languages which stipulates among other things that persons belonging to linguistic minorities have the right to enjoy, practice and use their own language, in private and public life, freely and without interference or any form of discrimination. Ill feelings are likely deep seated in the people

whose languages are not acknowledged. CS that does not cover all learners in a multilingual classroom might bring about exclusion.

Drawing from the above literature on the benefits and challenges of CS, one is more inclined to argue that the pedagogical relevance of CS cannot be ignored because of the challenges. CS as a pedagogical tool and strategy needs to be considered in multilingual classrooms.

Theoretical Framework

This study adopts Gibson's (1997/1998) Affordance Theory as its theoretical framework. Originally developed within the field of ecology, the theory has since been extended to other domains, including education and multilingualism, for its emphasis on the relationship between individuals and their environments. In essence, the theory of affordances focuses on the opportunities (or possibilities for action) that an environment provides to an individual, depending on their abilities, needs, and the context in which they operate.

In the context of multilingual education, Aronin and Singleton (2018) argue that Affordance Theory provides a powerful ecological lens for understanding how linguistic resources such as learners' home languages function as potential tools for learning. They explain that educational authorities and policymakers must constantly evaluate which linguistic affordances exist within a learning environment and determine which affordances should be enhanced, maintained, or removed to promote effective teaching and learning.

Viewing the classroom as a dynamic and interactive environment, this framework acknowledges that learning occurs through the co-construction of meaning among teachers and learners using the linguistic and cultural resources available to them. Every classroom interaction offers potential affordances, possibilities for understanding, participation, and identity construction, mediated by language. Hence, teachers' strategic use of code-switching (CS) can be understood as the activation of linguistic affordances that enable comprehension, inclusion, and engagement.

Applying Affordance Theory to this study, code-switching is conceptualized as a pedagogical affordance, a communicative strategy, that offers learners access to both content knowledge and linguistic development. By recognizing and utilizing learners' home languages as part of the instructional process, teachers expand the range of linguistic affordances available in the classroom. This not only supports cognitive understanding but also affirms learners' linguistic identities and cultural backgrounds.

Ultimately, the adoption of the Affordance Theory provides a conceptual basis for interpreting how code-switching contributes to inclusive and effective pedagogy in multilingual classrooms. It

helps explain how teachers and learners dynamically use available linguistic resources to create opportunities for participation, scaffold understanding, and transform multilingualism from a perceived barrier into a rich educational asset.

Methodology

As Fujii (2015:525) observes, “*observations of daily life are the bread and butter of ethnography.*” In this study, the concept of accidental ethnography is adopted. Fujii (2015:525) explains that accidental ethnography entails giving systematic attention to unplanned and spontaneous moments that occur beyond formal research settings such as interviews or surveys. During such instances, the researcher may encounter unexpected narratives or everyday scenes that had previously gone unnoticed but hold significant ethnographic value.

Codeswitching is a daily communicative tool employed by almost all Ghanaians. The politician employs it, the market woman uses it, and the educator finds it as a pedagogical tool readily available. The prevalence of the phenomenon has made it to be described as a third linguistic force of the bilingual (Forson, 1979), a bilingual asset (Brobbe, 2015) a type of skilled performance but not an alternative strategy (Myers-Scotton, 1993). In fact, codeswitching is a necessary communicative strategy in the life of almost all bilinguals/multilinguals. In gathering data, observations and directed conversations were used. Directed conversation is akin to Kato’s (1986) method of verbal data collection. Unlike Kato’s method which centered on question asking protocols, the method employed here was intentional and systematic conversations which centered on the use of CS in the Ghanaian classroom. The target group was practicing teaching in English, Science and Mathematics. These subjects became the point of focus because are the core subjects. When a student fails in any of these subjects, their progression in the academic ladder is either truncated, impeded or delayed. Subject teachers in these areas are likely to employ any methodological strategy they deem helpful to them and their learners

The aim of using directed conversation was to enable the participants share their experiences, emotions and views on how CS has been employed personally by them or other practitioners whilst they (research participants) were participant observers/on-looker observers. The interactants freely participated in the conversation. The researcher noted down salient points that brought out teachers and learners’ opinions on the use of codeswitching in Ghanaian classrooms. For the purposes of triangulation, the researcher’s personal observations were made. Observations are a naturalistic phenomenon that goes on in a situation whereby the needed information can properly be ascertained. As stated by Fujii above, observations are the bread and butter that can help a researcher obtain hidden information that other methods might have failed.

Because accidental ethnography was used, the directed conversation with participants were accidental. There was no particular way of sampling the population but the researcher made sure that all the participants were practicing teachers. The total population was sixteen (16); six (6) female practicing teachers who are or were in Ghanaian senior high schools as full-time teachers and ten (10) male practicing teachers who were or are still in some secondary schools in Ghana. Though the teachers were basically to share their experiences and observations on CS in secondary schools, some of them shared information that was relevant to the topic but not exclusively in the secondary school context. Some of the relevant data, though not experienced at the secondary school, they were used in the data presentation and discussion because they are crucial to policy making.

The motivation for the choice of secondary level education was grounded on the fact that such a level bridges the gap between the basic level and the tertiary level. It is also a place where learners of different Ghanaian languages and even cultural experiences find themselves in the same classroom. In a situation where the teacher is unable to codeswitch or able to codeswitch, what are the challenges arising and what might be the reaction of learners who are unable to make meaning out of the codeswitching are likely to be revealed through the choice of the level.

Based on the notes, comments and sentiments that sparked similar reactions, attitudes and perceptions have been grouped for the discussion of this work.

Research Results

Distribution of Participants by Area of Specialisation

<i>Code</i>	<i>Gender</i>	<i>Specialization</i>	<i>School Context</i>
F1	Female	English	SHS
F2	Female	English	SHS
F3	Female	Mathematics	SHS
F4	Female	Science (Integrated Science/Biology)	SHS
F5	Female	English	SHS
F6	Female	Science (Chemistry)	SHS
M1	Male	English	SHS
M2	Male	Mathematics	SHS
M3	Male	Science (Physics)	SHS
M4	Male	English	SHS
M5	Male	Mathematics	SHS
M6	Male	Science (Biology)	SHS
M7	Male	English	SHS
M8	Male	Mathematics	SHS
M9	Male	Science (Integrated Science)	SHS
M10	Male	English	SHS

Gender Within Specialization

<i>Specialization</i>	<i>Female</i>	<i>Male</i>	<i>Total</i>
<i>English</i>	3	3	6
<i>Mathematics</i>	1	3	4
<i>Science</i>	2	4	6
<i>Total</i>	6	10	16

Categorization of Responses Based on Themes

THEME 1: Pedagogical Necessity

General Pattern: 13 of 16 participants framed CS (code-switching) as a pedagogical tool rather than linguistic weakness.

Representative Responses

F1:

“Sometimes when explaining abstract grammar concepts, switching briefly into a familiar language ensures comprehension. Without that, some students remain silent.”

F3:

“Even outside SHS, I have observed that strategic switching builds conceptual clarity. It is not about lowering standards; it is about scaffolding.”

M2:

“If I insist strictly on Standard English, weaker students disengage. Code-switching bridges the gap.”

M5:

“In literature classes especially, drawing parallels in local languages deepens interpretation.”

F5:

“I see it as a transitional strategy. Once understanding is secured, we return to Standard English.”

M8:

“In teacher training sessions beyond SHS, facilitators also switch. So, it is clearly a pedagogical reality, even if unofficial.”

M9:

“Pedagogically useful, yes—but it must be controlled. Otherwise, students become too dependent.”

THEME 2: Policy Fear

General Pattern: 11 participants expressed some degree of policy anxiety, especially regarding examinations and institutional expectations. Their responses are presented below:

F2:

“There is always fear that supervisors may interpret switching as incompetence.”

F4:

“WAEC expectations influence us strongly. We prepare students for exams, so we feel pressured to maintain strict Standard English.”

M1:

“Officially, there is no written ban, but the culture discourages mixing codes.”

M3:

“The hidden curriculum is clear: speak ‘proper English’ at all times.”

F6:

“Even when it works pedagogically, I sometimes avoid it because I don’t want students thinking it is acceptable in exams.”

M7:

“Policy documents talk about global competitiveness, which indirectly discourages local linguistic integration.”

M10:

“As long as outcomes are good, no administrator has questioned my approach.”

THEME 3: Student Engagement

General Pattern: 14 participants linked CS directly to improved engagement, confidence, and participation.

Representative responses are shown below.

F1:

“Participation increases immediately when students realize they are allowed to draw from their linguistic background.”

M4:

“When I clarify a difficult point in a familiar language, hands go up instantly.”

F5:

“Shy students contribute more when the environment feels linguistically inclusive.”

M6:

“Classroom energy changes when students feel understood.”

M2:

“In mixed-ability classes, engagement depends on linguistic flexibility.”

F3:

“Even in workshops outside SHS, engagement rises when facilitators acknowledge linguistic diversity.”

M9 (more cautious view):

“Engagement increases, but we must gradually transition back to Standard English.”

Thematic Distribution Summary

Theme	Strongly Affirmed	Moderately Affirmed	Cautious/Qualified
Pedagogical Necessity	13	2	1
Policy Fear	8	3	5 (low fear)
Student Engagement	14	1	1

Presentation of results based on directed conversations and observations

As indicated in the methodology section that directed conversation and observations were employed to gather the data, the results that seem relevant are present here for the purposes of the study and the discussion that follows this section.

Participant 1

Researcher (RS): Have you ever taught in a secondary school?

Participant (PT): Yes.

RS: Did you code-switch and why?

PT: I did. If you don't you will be wasting your time. I can remember this story. When we were in the university, we went on a voluntary mission to teach in a primary school in a remote village. We were using English. Whenever we asked, "Do you understand? They responded: "Yes Sir". However, their faces didn't show that they understood the lesson. At a point, we turned to the L1 and asked:

Mo te aseε (Do you understand?). They responded: Yεn nteaseε. (We have understood nothing). But mo kaa se aane (But you responded yes).

They replied: The answer to “Do you understand” is yes.

Participant 2

PT: When I was in the training college in the Volta Region [name of college withheld], some of the tutors used CS a lot. I couldn't understand the L1 (Ewe). Mostly, I felt angry because I was left out. I was neglected. They seemed to have said within themselves; ‘Who brought you here?’

RS: How did you cope up with then?

PT: I used to ask my mates to translate to me.

Participant 3

PT: Many of us feel that our explanations can better be expressed in the L1. When you don't even intend to codeswitch, the facial expressions of the students alone will compel you to

rescue them through the use of their mother tongue – Twi. Some openly ask us to speak Twi. You see, even in staff meetings, the L1 is a great asset in presenting issues that would have been difficult to convey in the face of authorities.

RS: Does it mean teachers are incompetent in using English to deliver their lessons?

PT: Not really. No one will tell you to codeswitch if the policy makers themselves are asked to implement the policy they themselves formulated.

Comment from a learner:

Ɛbɛyɛ den na m'anya fahodie wɔ bere a me nimdeɛ wɔ kasa a me tumi kyerɛ m'adwene wɔ ho yie no, w'asi me kwan? Ɛdeen nti na Nkrumah kɔ gye fahodie maa Ghana nanso Abrɔfo kasa deɛ ɔgyae no?

(How can I feel free when I am denied to free my mind in a language I think I can best express my ideas? Why did Nkrumah [Ghana's First President] fight for the independence of Ghana but left this English language to stay?)

Findings Based on Themes

As indicated in the methodology section, data were generated through ethnographically grounded directed conversations and classroom-related observations. The directed conversations allowed participants to narrate lived experiences of code-switching (CS) within Ghanaian secondary school contexts, while observations provided contextual sensitivity to how language practices are embedded in everyday institutional life.

This section presents findings organized under three interrelated themes:

1. Pedagogical Necessity
2. Policy Fear
3. Student Engagement

The findings incorporate participant narratives, interactional excerpts from the directed conversations, and one learner comment that powerfully captures the ideological tensions surrounding language use in schools.

Theme 1: Pedagogical Necessity

Thirteen (13) of the sixteen (16) participants framed code-switching as a pedagogical tool rather than a linguistic weakness. Across English, Mathematics, and Science classrooms, CS was described as a necessary instructional scaffold for ensuring comprehension and conceptual clarity.

Code-Switching as Comprehension Rescue

Participant 1 narrated a powerful incident that illustrates the pedagogical urgency of CS.

Reflecting on a voluntary teaching experience in a rural school, the participant explained that students consistently responded “Yes Sir” when asked whether they understood. However, their facial expressions revealed confusion. When the question was reframed in Twi, “Mo te asee?”, students admitted: “Yɛn nte asee” (We have not understood).

The exchange exposed what may be termed performative understanding. Students rather respond correctly to the expected linguistic formula than demonstrating actual comprehension. The participant concluded: “If you don’t code-switch, you will be wasting your time.”

This narrative reveals CS as a mechanism for uncovering hidden misunderstanding and restoring epistemic honesty in the classroom.

Facial Expressions as Ethnographic Evidence

Participant 3 emphasized that even when teachers do not intend to code-switch, students’ facial expressions compel intervention. The participant explained:

“When you don’t even intend to code-switch, the facial expressions of the students alone will compel you to rescue them through the use of their mother tongue.”

This description situates CS as a response to embodied classroom signals rather than theoretical preference. Observationally, students’ silence, hesitation, and visual confusion functioned as triggers for linguistic mediation. CS is a spontaneous pedagogical strategy for a multilingual classroom teacher whose linguistic repertoire appears more of an asset than a disadvantage.

The participant further clarified that this practice does not imply incompetence in English delivery. Instead, it reflects responsiveness to learner realities. The statement, “Many of us feel that our explanations can better be expressed in the L1”, highlights that CS enhances precision rather than diluting rigor. Circuitous expressions and explanations that might cause confusion are better captured when CS is resorted to.

Scaffolding Rather than Substitution

Several participants conceptualized CS as transitional. F5 described it as:

“a transitional strategy. Once understanding is secured, we return to Standard English.”

Similarly, F3 noted that strategic switching builds conceptual clarity and should not be interpreted as lowering standards. This framing positions CS within a scaffolded pedagogy where comprehension precedes formal consolidation.

Even the cautious voice (M9) acknowledged its usefulness:

“Pedagogically useful, yes - but it must be controlled. Otherwise, students become too dependent.”

Thus, even dissenting perspectives affirmed pedagogical value while emphasizing regulation.

Theme 2: Policy Fear

Eleven (11) participants expressed some degree of policy anxiety, particularly regarding examinations and institutional expectations.

Policy Fear did not emerge from explicit written prohibitions but from what participants described as institutional culture and examination pressure.

Examination Regimes and Linguistic Surveillance

Participant 4 explicitly referenced West African Examination Council (WAEC) expectations, noting that exam preparation pressures teachers to maintain strict Standard English. The concern was that students might transfer informal classroom practices into examination scripts. Participant 6 echoed this concern:

“Even when it works pedagogically, I sometimes avoid it because I don’t want students thinking it is acceptable in exams.”

These narratives reveal a perceived tension between classroom pragmatism and assessment ideology.

Participant 1 described a “hidden curriculum” where teachers are expected to speak “proper English at all times.” Although no participant cited a formal ban, several described implicit professional surveillances, particularly during supervision or classroom observation.

Cultural Discouragement and Institutional Image

Participant 2 narrated a contrasting experience from teacher training in the Volta Region. Tutors frequently code-switched into Ewe, leaving the participant feeling excluded. The experience illustrates that CS can both include and exclude, depending on linguistic alignment. This account deepens the complexity of Policy Fear. It is not only about English dominance but also about linguistic power dynamics within multilingual settings.

Participant 7 suggested that policy discourse emphasizing “global competitiveness” indirectly discourages local linguistic integration. The implication is that English is symbolically tied to modernity and upward mobility.

However, not all participants expressed high anxiety. Participant 10 stated:

“As long as outcomes are good, no administrator has questioned my approach.”

This suggests variation in institutional climates and individual confidence.

Theme 3: Student Engagement

Fourteen (14) participants directly linked CS to improved engagement, confidence, and participation.

Participation and Confidence

F1 observed:

“Participation increases immediately when students realize they are allowed to draw from their linguistic background.”

M4 similarly noted that clarifying difficult points in a familiar language may lead to immediate classroom participation. These accounts suggest that linguistic recognition reduces fear and fosters cognitive risk-taking.

F5 highlighted the inclusion of shy students:

“Shy students contribute more when the environment feels linguistically inclusive.”

M6 described a noticeable shift in classroom atmosphere:

“Classroom energy changes when students feel understood.”

Engagement was thus described not merely as increased talk but as affective transformation.

Linguistic Freedom and Ideological Resistance

The learner comment recorded during observation provides powerful insight:

Ɛbɛyɛ dɛn na m’anya fahodie wɔ bere a me nimdeɛ wɔ kasa a me tumi kyere m’adwene wɔ ho yie no, w’asi me kwan? (How can I feel free when I am denied the freedom to express my mind in the language I know best?)

The learner’s invocation of Kwame Nkrumah and Ghana’s independence reframes classroom language policy as an issue of intellectual freedom. The rhetorical question, why independence from colonial rule did not include linguistic emancipation, reveals how deeply students internalize language ideology. This feeling is likely a representation of almost all Ghanaians.

This comment illustrates that CS is not only a pedagogical issue but also a symbolic one, touching on identity, autonomy, and postcolonial consciousness.

Thematic Distribution Summary

Theme	Strongly Affirmed	Moderately Affirmed	Cautious/Qualified
Pedagogical Necessity	13	2	1
Policy Fear	8	3	5 (low fear)
Student Engagement	14	1	1

The data demonstrate a strong correlation between Pedagogical Necessity and Student Engagement. Policy Fear functions as a moderating force but does not eliminate CS practice.

Teachers, therefore, operate within a negotiated professional space. They do not reject Standard English, nor do they abandon CS. Instead, they strategically balance both.

The findings position code-switching in four folds:

1. a comprehension rescue mechanism;
2. a scaffold for conceptual clarity;
3. a catalyst for engagement; and
4. a site of ideological tension.

Ultimately, CS in Ghanaian secondary schools emerges not as incompetence or deviation but as a context-sensitive pedagogical strategy shaped by multilingual realities and institutional pressures.

Discussion

The experience shared by the mathematics lecturer, who now teaches at a Ghanaian university, sets the tone for this discussion. The classroom episode in which learners repeatedly responded “Yes Sir” to “Do you understand?” yet later confessed in Twi, *Yɛn nteaseɛ* (“We have not understood anything”), illustrates the pedagogical illusion that may accompany exclusive L2 instruction. What appears humorous is, in reality, deeply revealing. It demonstrates how learners may comply linguistically without comprehending conceptually. As the lecturer noted, once he switched to the L1, authentic understanding emerged. This supports the thematic finding that 13 out of 16 participants framed code-switching (CS) as a pedagogical tool rather than linguistic weakness.

To illustrate the relevance of Pedagogical Necessity, participants repeatedly emphasized the instructional value of CS. For instance, F1 stated:

“Sometimes when explaining abstract grammar concepts, switching briefly into a familiar language ensures comprehension. Without that, some students remain silent.”

Similarly, M2 remarked:

“If I insist strictly on Standard English, weaker students disengage. Code-switching bridges the gap.”

These reflections confirm that teachers perceive CS as a scaffold that connects complex content

to learners' linguistic realities. This aligns with Camilleri's (1998) assertion that CS facilitates elicitation, allowing learners to express difficulties. More recent research supports this perspective. Amanda et al. (2025) found that teachers strategically switch codes to clarify meaning and reinforce understanding in English language classrooms. Likewise, Chean (2025) argues that CS enhances instructional clarity and conceptual reinforcement in multilingual settings.

Participant F5 further characterized CS as transitional rather than permanent:

"I see it as a transitional strategy. Once understanding is secured, we return to Standard English."

This comment reflects what Datokarama et al. (2025) describe as strategic bilingual mediation, where CS is used temporarily to reduce cognitive overload while maintaining long-term L2 development goals. Thus, the Ghanaian data support emerging scholarship that positions CS as a controlled pedagogical scaffold rather than a replacement for English-medium instruction.

Closely related to pedagogical necessity is Theme 3: Student Engagement, where 14 participants directly linked CS to increased participation and classroom vitality. F1 observed:

"Participation increases immediately when students realize they are allowed to draw from their linguistic background."

Similarly, M4 stated:

"When I clarify a difficult point in a familiar language, hands go up instantly."

These statements echo the classroom observation that the class "came to life" when the teacher code-switched. Engagement here is not merely behavioral but affective and cognitive. Rapuleng (2024) found that CS increased interaction and reduced anxiety in multilingual classrooms, leading to greater learner involvement. The Ghanaian findings mirror this pattern, especially where learners expressed confidence and willingness to contribute once linguistic inclusivity was established.

However, the data also introduce complexity. Under Theme 2: Policy Fear, 11 participants expressed concern regarding institutional expectations. F4 stated:

"WAEC expectations influence us strongly. We prepare students for exams, so we feel pressured to maintain strict Standard English."

Similarly, F2 noted:

"There is always fear that supervisors may interpret switching as incompetence."

These reflections reveal a tension between pedagogical effectiveness and institutional compliance. Although teachers acknowledge the utility of CS, they remain cautious due to examination culture and professional evaluation. This finding aligns with Osei-Boateng (2022), who notes that Ghana's English-medium policy exerts implicit pressure on teachers to maintain linguistic purity. It also supports García and Wei's (2014) argument that multilingual classroom practices often diverge from official monolingual policies, creating a policy-practice gap.

The exclusionary potential of CS also emerged in the directed conversations. One participant

lamented his experience in a multilingual training college:

“Some of the tutors used CS a lot. I couldn’t understand the L1 (Ewe). Mostly, I felt angry because I was left out. I was neglected.”

This narrative tempers the overwhelmingly positive perception of CS. While CS empowers when the teacher and learners share linguistic resources, it can marginalize others in heterogeneous settings. Cheng (2022) cautions against excessive reliance on one L1 in linguistically diverse classrooms, emphasizing the need for balanced and inclusive application. The Ghanaian data reinforce this caution: CS must be judicious and context-sensitive to avoid reproducing linguistic exclusion.

The emotional dimension of language policy surfaced vividly in the overheard learner comment invoking Kwame Nkrumah and Ghana’s independence:

“How can I feel free when I am denied to free my mind in a language I think I can best express my ideas?”

This statement transcends pedagogy and enters the realm of linguistic identity and postcolonial consciousness. It suggests that language choice in the classroom is not neutral; it carries symbolic meaning tied to freedom, empowerment, and cultural legitimacy. Contemporary translanguaging scholarship (García & Wei, 2014) similarly frames multilingual practices as acts of identity affirmation and cognitive empowerment. Although the teachers in this study spoke in terms of “code-switching” rather than “translanguaging,” their lived practices reflect the same integrated use of linguistic repertoires.

Finally, subject specialization did not appear to determine CS usage. While one participant claimed, “My teachers never codeswitched. It may be so because I offered Literature-in-English,” observational data revealed varied practices across disciplines. This supports Redinger’s (2010) view that attitudes toward CS are shaped more by ideological beliefs than subject boundaries. The Ghanaian evidence suggests that CS is situational, influenced by learner needs, teacher judgment, and classroom composition rather than curriculum area alone.

Integrating the thematic findings with recent scholarship reveals four key conclusions:

1. CS as Pedagogical Scaffold: Participants overwhelmingly affirmed that CS ensures comprehension and conceptual clarity, supporting findings by Chean (2025) and Amanda et al. (2025).
2. CS as Engagement Catalyst: Teachers linked CS directly to participation and confidence, echoing Rapuleng’s (2024) findings on classroom interactivity.
3. CS as Context-Sensitive Practice: The exclusionary experience reported by one participant confirms Cheng’s (2022) caution that injudicious CS may marginalize learners.

4. Policy–Practice Tension: Teachers navigate institutional expectations shaped by examination bodies and national language policy, consistent with Osei-Boateng (2022) and García and Wei (2014).

In effect, the Ghanaian classroom data both confirm and extend contemporary research. Code-switching is not a deviation from pedagogical standards but a dynamic, reflective, and context-bound instructional strategy. When strategically employed, it bridges comprehension gaps, enhances engagement, and affirms linguistic identity. When mismanaged or suppressed, it risks fostering exclusion or perpetuating silent misunderstanding.

The central finding of this study, therefore, is that code-switching in Ghana’s multilingual classrooms functions as a negotiated pedagogical reality, shaped by necessity, constrained by policy, and sustained by teachers’ professional discretion.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This paper concludes by reiterating the enduring relevance of the *Asmara Declaration* on African Languages and Literature as a moral and intellectual guide for language policy and practice in Africa. It serves as a timely reminder to African leaders, policymakers, and educators of the urgent need to revisit their commitments to linguistic equity and inclusivity in education. As cited in Bokamba (2015), two key principles from the declaration remain particularly instructive:

- i. The vitality and equality of African languages must be recognized as a basis for the future empowerment of African peoples.
- ii. All African children have the unalienable right to attend school and learn in their mother tongues. Every effort should therefore be made to develop African languages at all levels of education.

Recognizing the linguistic rights of learners in multilingual contexts is central to achieving equitable education. Code-switching (CS), as a communicative and pedagogical strategy, provides a viable means of bridging linguistic gaps in classrooms where multiple languages coexist. Abgedor (1994) rightly observes that when excessive emphasis is placed on English, large sections of the population are effectively excluded from access to “vital information on matters that could otherwise promote the economic, social, and political well-being of the people.” This observation directly applies to the Ghanaian educational context, where rigid English-only practices often limit learners’ comprehension and participation. As a result, many students fail to benefit fully from classroom instruction, contributing to high dropout rates and underachievement.

The persistent disconnect between language policy and actual classroom practice reflects a broader ideological gap between policymakers and educational realities. To promote meaningful

learning and social inclusion, there is a pressing need for governments, particularly within African multilingual societies, to re-examine inherited colonial language ideologies and to design policies that are contextually relevant, culturally grounded, and pedagogically sound. Code-switching, already a natural feature of everyday communication across Ghanaian society, can serve as an effective transitional linguistic strategy toward more inclusive and functional multilingual education.

DECLARATION OF GENERATIVE AI AND AI-ASSISTED TECHNOLOGIES IN THE WRITING PROCESS

Generative AI tools were employed exclusively for language editing, grammatical refinement, and enhanced readability. The authors bear full responsibility for all intellectual content, including study design, data collection, analysis, and interpretation of findings.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

The authors declare no competing interests.

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Intergenerational Language Transmission in Urban Spaces: Constructing Family Identities in Multilingual Contexts

ABSTRACT

In multilingual urban spaces, families actively navigate the use of dominant languages while preserving indigenous ones. Intergenerational language transmission becomes central to sustaining linguistic heritage and constructing family identities. This study investigates the strategies employed by parents and grandparents to promote language use at home and examines how language transmission influences family identities in multilingual urban settings. Grounded in Family Language Policy (FLP) (Curdt-Christiansen, 2009) and the Sociocultural Theory of Identity Construction (Bucholtz & Hall, 2005), the study employed a qualitative ethnographic design involving twenty-four (24) participants from eight (8) families, four each, from Kumasi and Cape Coast. Purposive and snowball sampling techniques were employed to identify three-generation families with active intergenerational contact, and semi-structured interviews were conducted with the participants. The data were analysed thematically. The findings indicate that parents and grandparents employ multiple strategies to promote the use of indigenous languages. These include the consistent use of indigenous languages at home, rewards, storytelling, and, notably, informal language classes organised by grandparents, which emerged as a significant finding. Additionally, three established family identities were identified: ethnic identity, elite bilingual identity, and mixed identity. Alongside these, two emergent identities were further identified: a conflicted bilingual identity and a historically rooted colonial-heritage identity. These emergent identities reflect psychological tensions, intergenerational concerns, and the lasting impact of colonial history on language practices. The study concludes that urban families serve as dynamic sites for both the preservation and transformation of linguistic heritage, striking a balance between educational priorities, cultural maintenance, and historical legacies.

Keywords: *Family Identity, Identity Construction, Intergenerational, Multilingualism, Urban Spaces*

Introduction

Multilingualism has emerged as a defining characteristic of modern urban life, influenced by globalization, migration, and increasing access to education (Antwi, 2022; Little, 2020; Seong & Luef, 2020). Urban spaces bring together various linguistic communities, where daily interactions render multilingualism not just a practical necessity but also a fundamental aspect of urban existence

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(Purkarthofer, 2020; Sevinç & Dewaele, 2018). In these multilingual settings, families play a crucial role in managing linguistic diversity (De Houwer, 2020; Lanza, 2021; Lanza & Gomes, 2020).

At the core of navigating the complexities of multiple languages lies the process of intergenerational language transmission, which involves passing language from one generation to the next (Curdt-Christiansen, 2013; Curdt-Christiansen & Huang, 2020). This process is not automatic; rather, it is influenced by ideological factors (Albury, 2020; Nakamura, 2016). In many urban contexts, dominant languages are frequently associated with social mobility, success, and modernity (Asilevi, 2011; Edu-Buandoh, 2016). In contrast, indigenous and minority languages are perceived as outdated or lacking economic value (Antwi & Edu-Buandoh, 2025; Owu-Ewie & Edu-Buandoh, 2014). These perceptions create tensions within families regarding which language choice(s) to use at home (Karpava, 2021; Schalley & Eisenchlas, 2020).

Studies focusing on African contexts have largely investigated family language use through the lenses of domain distribution, language choice, and endangerment (Afrifa et al., 2019; Gabriel, 2024; Lawer, 2025; Ohene-Asante, 2021). Similarly, studies on Family Language Policy (FLP) have examined parental ideologies and language management strategies, often within migration and diasporic contexts (Fabusoro, 2022; Gabriel, 2024; Kilangi, 2024). While these studies shed light on how languages are maintained, shifted, or managed, they tend to prioritize concerns regarding language vitality rather than theorising intergenerational language transmission as an active process through which family identities are produced and negotiated within specific urban sociolinguistic ecologies. This theoretical gap is particularly pronounced in urban Ghanaian contexts, where colonial histories, entrenched hierarchies between English and indigenous languages, internal migration and aspirations for socioeconomic mobility shape multilingual repertoires. Moreover, much of the existing literature in Africa has primarily focused on nuclear family relations, especially parent-child relationships (Kilangi, 2024; Lawer, 2025; Mkrweqana, 2022), leaving the influential role of grandparents in shaping language ideologies, mediating language continuity, and legitimizing specific identity claims within the household comparatively underexamined. By emphasizing parents and grandparents, this study highlights the intergenerational negotiation of language practices and demonstrates how authority and lineage intersect in the construction of family identities.

Anchored in Curdt-Christiansen's (2009) Family Language Policy and Bucholtz and Hall's (2005) Sociocultural theory of identity, this study reconceptualizes intergenerational language transmission in urban Ghana as an important mechanism for the construction of family identity. By examining the strategies employed by parents and grandparents to promote language use at home and analyzing how these practices contribute to the construction of family identities in multilingual urban environments, the study foregrounds the dimensions of identity construction within family language practices that

remain underexplored in existing African sociolinguistic studies. The remainder of the paper is structured as follows. The next section presents a literature review that situates the study within existing research. This is followed by a discussion of the theoretical framework, methodology, findings, and finally, the conclusion.

Literature Review

This section examines the strategies that parents and grandparents employ to preserve indigenous languages within their homes. It also discusses the relationship between language use and the construction of family identity, highlighting how language practices contribute to a sense of belonging in multilingual urban spaces.

Family Language Ideologies and Intergenerational Strategies for Home Language Use

Language use within the family is neither neutral nor incidental; rather, it is shaped by deeply entrenched language ideologies (Albury, 2020). In multilingual urban spaces, these ideologies significantly influence the strategies families employ to pass down language through generations (Karpava, 2022; King et al., 2008). Parents and grandparents often operate from differing ideological perspectives, shaped by their generational backgrounds, life experiences, and educational levels. These perspectives inform explicit language management decisions and the more subtle practices embedded in daily interactions.

Brooksbank (2017) examined how parents in bilingual households utilize discourse strategies to promote the use of a minority language, Spanish, within an English-dominant context in the United States. Grounded in the theoretical frameworks of Language Socialization and Family Language Policy (FLP), the study centered on Lanza's (1997) parental discourse hypothesis, which posits that parents' reactions to their children's language choices play a crucial role in shaping future linguistic behaviors. The findings indicated that parents adopted a "minimal grasp" approach, in which they feign a misunderstanding of their child's use of the dominant language. This strategy proved most effective in eliciting responses in the minority language. However, it was employed less frequently than more permissive strategies, such as parental code-switching, which signalled acceptance of English and often undermined the maintenance of the minority language.

Similarly, Kilangi (2024) conducted a study examining family language ideologies and intergenerational strategies for home language use among inter-ethnic families in Magu, Tanzania. Grounded in the Family Language Policy (FLP), the study utilized a qualitative approach with an interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) design. The findings indicated that few parents

encouraged their children to use ethnic greetings and occasionally spoke to them in their native languages. More importantly, many parents turned to grandparents and extended family members who lived in rural areas to provide their children with exposure to ethnic languages, viewing them as more proficient and better equipped to offer authentic language input.

Building on these insights, Fabusoro (2022) examined the bilingual and cultural literacy practices of Yoruba heritage families residing in the Midwestern United States. The study focused on parental strategies to promote the use of Yoruba in predominantly English-speaking environments. It was grounded in sociocultural theories, particularly Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) and the concept of scaffolding, as well as New Literacy Studies (NLS). The findings indicated that family history, including the parents' upbringing and their ideological commitment to the Yoruba language and culture, was a significant motivation for transmitting their indigenous language to their children. A notable strategy observed was the use of Yoruba-language media, such as movies and cartoons, to reinforce linguistic and cultural knowledge. The study concluded that early, consistent, and intentional exposure to the indigenous language and culture in the home environment significantly enhances children's bilingual development and cultural identity.

Narrowing the discussion to the Ghanaian context, Adjei and Ansah (2022) investigated how storytelling practices contributed to language socialization across generations and evaluated the factors that influence their persistence or decline. Using Khan's (2009) social aesthetics as a theoretical framework, the researchers collected data through recordings of storytelling sessions featuring elderly narrators (aged 50–90) and younger participants (aged 8–30). The findings revealed that while grandparents (or elders) employed storytelling as a purposeful, culturally embedded strategy to promote language use at home, parents have largely stepped back from actively engaging in language transmission practices through storytelling, viewing it as outdated. The study concluded that revitalizing storytelling as a culturally embedded, home-based strategy could be important in promoting intergenerational language transmission and preserving cultural identity within multilingual families.

Lawer (2025) also conducted a qualitative study to examine language use in households where parents have different native languages (L1). The study was grounded in Family Language Policy (FLP) and Sociolinguistic domains theory. The findings revealed that a notably effective strategy for supporting intergenerational language transmission was the consistent use of the mother's native language during daily interactions with the children. Conversely, families that primarily communicated in English, whether due to a lack of a shared indigenous language or the perceived neutrality and utility of English, encountered significant obstacles to L1 transmission.

The reviewed empirical studies collectively highlight how family language ideologies shape and

are shaped by intergenerational strategies for transmitting indigenous languages within multilingual households. The findings consistently indicate that while families often express a strong attachment to their indigenous languages, these ideological commitments do not always translate into structured or sustained language practices at home. The strategies employed range from deliberate efforts to more incidental approaches. A recurring theme across the studies is the challenge of maintaining consistent language use in the face of pressure from dominant languages, particularly English, as well as the routines of urban life. However, what remains insufficiently explored is the variety and nature of strategies that parents and grandparents in contemporary urban Ghanaian households actively or passively implement to encourage the use of indigenous languages at home, and how the demands of urban multilingual living shape these strategies.

Intergenerational Language Practices and Family Identity Construction in Multilingual Urban Spaces

In increasingly multilingual urban spaces, the family plays a pivotal role in not only transmitting and utilizing language but also in shaping and constructing shared identities across generations (Curdt-Christiansen & Huang, 2020; Ellis & Sims, 2022). Urban settings present challenges and opportunities for families navigating multiple languages (Purkarthofer, 2020). Consequently, how families engage with language at home is fundamental to the construction of family identity.

Tamleh et al. (2024) investigated how Iranian migrant families in the Netherlands use language practices and ideologies to preserve their heritage language, Persian, and how these practices intersect with identity. Grounded in Spolsky's (2004) Tripartite model of Language Policy, the study employed a qualitative approach; however, it did not detail the specific design used. The findings revealed that these families constructed a culturally rooted, emotionally connected, and heritage-affirming family identity that resists linguistic assimilation. Parents strongly associated the Persian language with cultural pride, emotional intimacy, and family cohesion. The authors concluded that through conscious language policies and daily practices, families can utilize language to construct, negotiate, and preserve family identity in the face of linguistic assimilation within multilingual urban settings.

Similarly, Yousef and Taylor-Leech (2018) conducted a qualitative, exploratory case study of Arabic-speaking new-Australian mothers in Brisbane, Queensland. The study examined the challenges Arabic-speaking new-Australian mothers face in maintaining their heritage language. Utilizing Spolsky's (2004) Family Language Policy, the study involved four (4) well-educated Arab-Australian mothers. The findings revealed that mothers positioned Arabic as a symbol of cultural identity, using it to pass down values, traditions, and narratives from their countries of origin to their children.

Furthermore, the families constructed a religious identity, underscored by Arabic's intrinsic connection to Islam. For these mothers, the transmission of Arabic was crucial for equipping their children to participate in religious practices, understand Islamic texts, and uphold the moral values inherent in their faith. The authors concluded that intergenerational language transmission within the home not only supports the maintenance of indigenous language but also serves as a powerful mechanism for constructing complex family identities in multilingual urban environments.

In the South African context, Mkrweqana (2022) examined how multilingual families navigate language choices within their homes in urban settings. Grounded in Vygotsky's Sociocultural theory, the study employed a qualitative approach informed by a social constructivist paradigm. The participants included two parents from different ethnic backgrounds who were either married or cohabiting and had at least two children in their family unit. The findings revealed a culturally rooted family identity, with parents emphasizing their responsibility to preserve their cultural heritage by speaking their mother tongues at home. The study found the emergence of a socially adaptive family identity as families balanced the preservation of their heritage with pragmatic adaptations.

In Ghana, Nutakor and Amfo (2018) explored children's language socialization practices, focusing on compound houses in three urban multilingual suburbs of Accra. Grounded in the Ethnography of Communication and the Community of Practice framework, the study gathered data from fifty (50) purposively selected participants, 30 children and 20 adults, from six compound households. The findings revealed that while families had access to, and often valued, their ethnic languages, daily language use was primarily shaped by dominant urban languages. Consequently, children were socialized into linguistic patterns that reflected broader urban norms rather than their ancestral heritage, leading to the construction of an urban family identity that prioritized adaptability and alignment with mainstream linguistic practices. Furthermore, the study found that many families adopted an assimilative identity, either consciously or unconsciously, by downplaying the transmission of indigenous languages in favour of more dominant ones. Nutakor and Amfo (2018) concluded that in multilingual urban contexts, language transmission within the family does not merely preserve communication; it fundamentally constructs or even displaces family identity in response to the pressures and realities of urban multilingual life.

Collectively, these studies demonstrate that intergenerational language practices in multilingual urban settings are key mechanisms for constructing and negotiating family identities. However, significant analytical and generational limitations remain. Existing studies primarily highlight parents, especially mothers, as the main agents of family language policy, thereby sidelining the pivotal role of grandparents in influencing intergenerational language transmission and identity construction. This focus on the nuclear family obscures the collaborative nature of identity construction that occurs across

extended kin networks, particularly in contexts where grandparents serve as cultural custodians and linguistic authorities. Additionally, while studies in urban Ghana highlight language socialisation patterns, they mainly emphasise children's linguistic outcomes without exploring how everyday intra-family language practices contribute to the construction of family identities across generations within the urban home. As a result, existing studies provide only an understanding of how multilingual urban families create continuity, belonging, and cultural meaning through language. To address this gap, further empirical research is needed to investigate how both parents and grandparents influence family identities through language transmission and usage in multilingual urban contexts.

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored in two complementary theoretical perspectives: Family Language Policy (FLP) and the Sociocultural Theory of Identity Construction.

This study draws on Family Language Policy (FLP), as developed by Curdt-Christiansen (2009). FLP is based on the premise that language practices within familial settings are neither random nor incidental; rather, they are shaped by ideologies, conscious decisions, and the broader sociocultural context in which the family exists (Nakamura, 2016). It positions the home as a site for language planning, where beliefs about language intersect with everyday practices and efforts to manage language transmission across generations. At the core of FLP are three interrelated components: language beliefs, language practices, and language management. Language beliefs encompass the ideologies and value systems underpinning family attitudes toward different languages. Language practices pertain to the actual use of language in daily interactions among family members, shaped by purpose, setting, and relational dynamics. Language management involves the intentional strategies implemented to influence these practices, such as encouraging the use of an indigenous language, restricting the use of dominant or foreign languages, or establishing routines that foster bilingual or multilingual proficiency. Although language beliefs and practices are recognized as interconnected, they are not the main focus. This study focuses on language management, the deliberate strategies utilized by parents and grandparents to shape language use in urban households.

The study also integrates the Sociocultural Theory of Identity Construction as articulated by Bucholtz and Hall (2005). This theory provides a discursive and interactional perspective on identity, viewing it not as a fixed or inherent quality but as an emergent, context-dependent, and socially constructed phenomenon. Therefore, identity is generated within linguistic interactions and is best understood as the social positioning of oneself and others. The theory is structured around five core principles. The first principle, emergence, suggests that identity does not pre-exist but is dynamically

constructed through discourse. The second principle, positionality, examines how speakers adopt or are ascribed specific social roles and how these roles influence the construction of identity during interactions. The third principle, indexicality, refers to how linguistic choices signify social meanings and categories. The fourth principle, relationality, posits that identity is constructed through intersubjective relations. These relations are fluid and are tactically negotiated throughout interactions. Lastly, the principle of partialness acknowledges that identity is never entirely knowable or coherent. It is perpetually incomplete, shaped by the specific interactional context, institutional power, and broader ideological influences.

Taken together, Family Language Policy (FLP) accounts for the deliberate language management strategies families employ. At the same time, Bucholtz and Hall's (2005) Sociocultural theory of identity explains how these linguistic choices simultaneously construct family identities.

Research Methods

This study employed a qualitative ethnographic design (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). The research was conducted in two urban centers in Ghana, Kumasi and Cape Coast, each chosen for its unique yet complementary multilingual and sociocultural characteristics. A total of eight (8) families participated in the study, with four (4) families selected from each city. Given the predominance of nuclear family structures in urban Ghana, purposive sampling was employed to identify initial families comprising three generations (grandparents, parents, and children) who either cohabited or maintained regular intergenerational contact. To locate additional families with active grandparental involvement, which is relatively uncommon in urban settings, snowball sampling was employed, with initial participants referring other eligible families. In total, twenty-four (24) participants were involved, typically consisting of one grandparent, one parent, and one child from each family. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with each participant. These interviews were complemented by participant observation in family homes (Asare-Amoah & Eshun, 2015). To minimize the observer's paradox, researchers made repeated visits and engaged in prolonged interaction to build rapport and foster a sense of familiarity. Data were analysed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), following an inductive approach where initial codes emerged directly from the data through close and repeated readings of interview transcripts and field notes. The coding process was iterative, progressing from preliminary open coding to the refinement and clustering of related codes into broader thematic categories. As patterns became more salient across different families and generational groups, themes were reviewed, compared, and adjusted to ensure both internal coherence and conceptual distinctiveness. The subsequent interpretation of these themes was guided by Family Language Policy (FLP) and the Sociocultural Theory of Identity. Data from interviews and observations were

triangulated to enhance trustworthiness and analytical rigour, allowing emerging interpretations to be examined across multiple data sources and interactional contexts. Throughout the analytic process, reflexive memo-writing was maintained to document interpretive decisions and monitor potential researcher bias. Member checking was employed to verify and refine emerging themes by sharing preliminary interpretations with selected participants and incorporating their feedback where appropriate. Confidentiality and anonymity were ensured through the use of pseudonyms and the masking of identifying information, and all participants provided informed consent before their involvement.

The following research questions guided the study.

- a. What strategies do parents and grandparents employ to promote language use at home?
- b. How does language transmission and use within the family construct family identities in multilingual urban spaces?

Research Findings and Discussion

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

What strategies do parents and grandparents employ to promote language use at home?

In urban spaces in Ghana, the home plays a crucial role in both the transmission and marginalization of languages. Utilizing the Family Language Policy framework (Curdt-Christiansen, 2009), this analysis examines language management by exploring the intentional strategies that parents and grandparents implement to promote the use of indigenous languages within the household.

Data from intergenerational urban households in Cape Coast and Kumasi indicate that families continue to transmit both indigenous Ghanaian languages, such as Fante, Akuapem Twi, Asante Twi, and Ga, alongside English, which serves as a second and official language. However, the data highlight a notable contrast in how these languages are promoted within the home. While English tends to be used more incidentally rather than consciously, it is often reinforced through casual verbal praise and nonverbal encouragement. Parents and grandparents do not deliberately promote English. In contrast, the promotion of indigenous languages is markedly more intentional and structured. Parents and grandparents implement strategies to encourage the use of indigenous languages, including consistently speaking these languages at home, offering rewards, and sharing folktales.

Excerpt 1

I insist that they speak Twi (Asante). I want them to know how to speak our local language. (KF1P)

Excerpt 2

My grandma is a Ga; she speaks only Ga at home to me. She always wants me to speak Ga. (KF3C)

Excerpt 3

Since their parents are Fantes and I am also a Fante, I want them (grandchildren) to speak Fante well. (CF2G)

Excerpt 4

We speak only Akuapem-Twi at home. My children, too. It is their father's language, and that's what they speak to communicate with their grandparents. (KF2P)

Excerpt 5

The trend now is English; if you don't teach them (children) well, they can't communicate in it. So, that's what I speak with them about at home. These days, everybody's child is speaking English ... (CF1P)

The data indicate that both indigenous Ghanaian languages and English are being transmitted within intergenerational urban households. Dialects of Akan, such as Asante Twi, Akuapem Twi, Fante, and Ga (a non-Akan dialect), are utilized in daily family interactions, showcasing a continued commitment to preserving these indigenous languages across generations. English is also present in the data, primarily as a response to societal expectations and educational demands.

With the linguistic diversity within households established, the data highlight a significant distinction in how languages are promoted across intergenerational urban families. While English is indeed present, it is often encouraged through casual praise and non-verbal gestures, rather than through structured or intentional strategies. One parent expresses this sentiment, noting:

Excerpt 6

When my boy speaks English, I feel proud as a mother. Sometimes, I tell him, "Well done," to encourage him. (KF4P)

Similarly, a grandparent shared:

Excerpt 7

Today, English is everywhere, and I want my grandchild to excel as well. I clap for him whenever he says a new word so that he can learn more. (KF4G)

The excerpts demonstrate that, while English is acknowledged and frequently used in urban homes, its reinforcement typically occurs incidentally. This phenomenon can be attributed to the societal dominance of the English language, which lessens the need for intentional efforts to promote its use. This is consistent with Lising's (2022) observation that the pervasive presence and perceived necessity of English often prompt families to adopt home-language practices that favour English, with minimal strategic effort.

In contrast, the transmission of indigenous languages is more intentional and supported by a variety of deliberate strategies employed by both parents and grandparents. Many actively choose to communicate with their children and grandchildren in the indigenous language. As one grandmother remarked,

Excerpt 8

*I encourage them (grandchildren) to speak Akuapem Twi by speaking it myself with them.
As they say, Leadership by example. (KF2G)*

A father similarly noted,

Excerpt 9

I intentionally speak Akuapem Twi with them so they can learn it. If I don't do that, they will lose it. (KF2P)

A child's account confirmed this practice:

Excerpt 10

My grandmother and my father can speak English, but they act as if they can't. They always speak Akuapem-Twi at home. (KF2C)

These excerpts highlight the consistent use of indigenous languages by both parents and grandparents, showcasing a deliberate effort to preserve them within the urban household. This contrasts with Kilangi's (2024) study, which found that only a few parents occasionally spoke to their children in their native languages.

Another intentional strategy employed by parents and grandparents involves using incentives to promote the use and acquisition of indigenous languages. A mother noted,

Excerpt 11

I told Kweku that if he passes the BECE Fante, I will give him something. And I have told her (my daughter) that if she passes Fante in her exams, we will go to KFC or Pizzaman. (CF1P)

A grandmother remarked;

Excerpt 12

I buy gifts for my grandchildren when they tell me they passed their exams, especially the Fante exams. (CF3G)

A child also confirmed this, stating,

Excerpt 13

... my grandma rewards me for speaking Fante. (CF1C)

These excerpts illustrate how positive reinforcement, through gifts, treats, or outings, promotes the use and learning of indigenous languages. Rewards are directly linked to performance in

indigenous language exams, not solely to demonstrate academic capability, but rather to serve as evidence that the child is sincerely engaging with and learning the language. This implies that families perceive these exams as an effective means of monitoring and validating their children's acquisition of indigenous languages (Alfat & Que, 2022).

Another deliberate strategy for promoting indigenous languages is storytelling. A grandmother articulated,

Excerpt 14

I tell my grandchildren stories in Akuapem Twi. You know, as I narrate the story to them, there are songs I sing too, and I teach them those songs too.

(KF2G)

Another grandmother echoed this practice, saying,

Excerpt 15

When they (grandchildren) are home, especially on Saturdays, I tell them stories, and they like them.

(CF1G)

Notably, the data suggest that grandparents are the primary storytellers. A child confirmed this, saying,

Excerpt 16

... It is my grandma who always tells us stories in Akuapem Twi.

(KF2C)

A mother similarly expressed her sentiment,

Excerpt 17

Their grandmother tells them stories in the local language. As for that,

I must give her credit.

(CF3P)

These excerpts illustrate how generational roles within the family influence the transmission of language. Grandparents, often seen as guardians of tradition, tend to assume a greater responsibility and have more time to engage in storytelling. In contrast, parents appear to be largely absent from this role, as indicated by the data. This observation supports Adjei and Ansah's (2022) assertion that older generations are more actively engaged in indigenous storytelling traditions, thereby fostering the continuation of indigenous languages. Meanwhile, younger generations, particularly parents in this context, tend to withdraw from such practices.

In addition to the commonly employed strategies, a significant finding of the study highlights the proactive involvement of older generations, particularly grandparents, in organizing informal indigenous language classes during weekends and school vacations. This was illustrated by a grandmother who expressed:

Excerpt 18

I teach them. We have a little school every Saturday, and when they vacate. I teach them the names of the days, the week, months, and the year. We also learn some songs, Fante songs. (CF1G)

A mother corroborated this practice,

Excerpt 19

There has been a significant improvement in their Fante speaking because Grandma took it upon herself to teach them. On Saturdays, they will do Fante school, so grandma will gather them and teach them.

(CF1P)

A child further confirmed,

Excerpt 20

... my grandma teaches us Fante every Saturday.

(CF1C)

These excerpts collectively emphasize the central role of grandparents, especially grandmothers, in the transmission of indigenous languages. The structured and routine nature of these Saturday and vacation classes illustrates that intergenerational language transmission is not merely incidental, but rather a deliberate and organized practice. Furthermore, the corroboration from both parents and children highlights the perceived effectiveness of this approach in improving children's proficiency in indigenous languages.

How does language transmission and use within the family construct family identities in multilingual urban spaces?

In multilingual urban contexts, family language practices extend beyond mere communication; they operate as interactional sites where identities emerge, are negotiated, and are continually reshaped (Ellis & Sims, 2022). Thus, language transmission is pivotal in shaping how families perceive themselves and how others perceive them. Drawing on Bucholtz and Hall's (2005) Sociocultural theory of identity, the data reveal that language practices within families construct analytically distinguishable identities such as ethnic, elite, and mixed identities. The identity categories are constructs derived from patterned language orientations across families. The following excerpts highlight these constructions of identities.

Excerpt 21

I am a retired teacher, but I don't encourage the children to speak English at home. ... we speak Twi, and I feel proud of my language. If you lose your language, you lose your culture. (KF3G)

Excerpt 22

Since their parents are Fante, and I am also a Fante, I want all of us to speak Fante well; that's our identity. (CF2G)

Excerpt 23

I am proud to be a Fante; that is my identity. I was in Koforidua the last time, my tone alone let them know that I am a Fante. So, when I speak, ... they will call me Maame Fante. (CF3P)

Excerpt 24

I think we have to pass on what we have to our younger generations. ... We have to recognise ourselves as Asantes. That is who we are. (KF1P)

The excerpts highlight the construction of ethnic identity. The use and transmission of indigenous languages serve as key indicators of belonging and cultural continuity. This identity is constructed through everyday interactions and is indexically tied to group affiliation (Bucholtz & Hall, 2005). Within urban households, the sustained use of indigenous languages strengthens relational bonds within both familial and communal contexts. Consequently, language serves as a tangible index of identity, allowing others to recognize a speaker's ethnic background. This illustrates how multilingual families in the competitive linguistic environment of urban Ghana actively promote indigenous languages as essential cultural symbols and strategic resources, essential for maintaining group visibility and cohesion (Tamleh et al., 2024).

The utilization and transmission of language within urban familial contexts serve as indicators of aspirations related to social status and educational attainment. Families strategically adopt the English language to enhance their social positioning. The data illustrates this.

Excerpt 25

English is what we speak at home. My neighbours in the next house see us as educated, and when they talk to us, I can see that they respect us. (KF3P)

Excerpt 26

... because of our environment, brɔ̃fosɛm nkoaa (only English). We stay here with some lecturers, and because they are lecturers, they don't want to speak Fante. (CF2P)

Excerpt 27

As educated as I am, I can't teach my children the local language, for them to fail at school. English is what will take them far ... (CF1P)

Excerpt 28

They go to school and get little knowledge, and when they get home, it is Fante, Fante, Fante. We decided to stop that and turn to English so they can be perfect in English, which is what will ensure they do well.

(CF3P)

The excerpts illustrate the construction of an elite identity, where English functions as both a practical and symbolic resource for social positioning. Urban families intentionally adopt English as a means of signaling their membership in an educated or upwardly mobile social group. This deliberate choice reflects Bucholtz and Hall's (2005) principle of positionality, through which speakers align themselves with socially valued attributes such as prestige, competence, and respectability. In multilingual urban contexts, English also carries significant indexical meanings, often indexing modernity, educational attainment, and socio-economic aspirations. This pattern supports the argument that socially adaptive family identities are shaped by the unique challenges and opportunities characteristic of urban multilingual environments (Mkrweqana, 2022).

The data further underscore the emergence of a mixed identity, as urban families blend English with indigenous languages in their daily interactions. This mixed identity is reflected in their code-switching practices and the fluidity with which they navigate different linguistic repertoires. It aligns with Bucholtz and Hall's (2005) concept of partialness, in which identities are fluid, context-dependent, and never entirely knowable or coherent. The families' code-switching demonstrates how linguistic forms are strategically employed to balance cultural preservation with the practical demands of communication in a multilingual urban setting, as evidenced by the excerpts. This contrasts sharply with the assimilative trends noted by Nutakor and Amfo (2018), where urban families often reduce their use of indigenous languages in favor of dominant ones. Mixed identities are thus characterized by additive, relatively stable bilingual positioning, in which families intentionally integrate English and indigenous languages without expressing ideological tension or regret. The excerpts illustrate this.

Excerpt 29

You know we, the Fantes, speak English Fante, and so it is a mixed identity. So, we are English Fante if there is something like that.

(CF1P)

Excerpt 30

I switch from Fante to English if I want to tell her (my sister) something. Sometimes, too, if I am looking for a Fante word but I don't remember, I say it in English.

(CF1C)

Excerpt 31

The truth is that I cannot speak Twi throughout with you without mixing English words. My Twi is not too pure like my mother's.

(KF2P)

Excerpt 32

As for my husband and me, we have decided since day one that we will use both English and Twi at home. So, we blend both when speaking to our children. English is important, and Twi is important too.

(KF3P)

A significant finding from the data is the emergence of conflicted bilingual identities among urban families. Unlike the mixed identities described earlier, which reflect stable, additive bilingual integration, conflicted bilingual identities are marked by expressed ambivalence, guilt, and uncertainty about language priorities and the long-term intergenerational consequences. The excerpts provided further exemplify these tensions.

Excerpt 33

Now, ... even though I want them (children) to learn and speak English because they need it at school, I also want them to speak Fante because they study it at school and must pass it too. So, now I feel guilty and confused about pushing English too much.

(CF1P)

Excerpt 34

Nowadays, even when I want to speak Twi, I forget myself, and I speak English. I am getting confused myself.

(KF2P)

Excerpt 35

What troubles me is which of the two languages I want them (children) to speak. ..., because of too much English, my Twi is not good. It worries me too that if my children speak a lot of English, then they will end up like me.

(KF3P)

These excerpts demonstrate that families face competing priorities regarding language use and transmission. They are torn between the educational and social benefits of English and the cultural value of indigenous languages. The tension between promoting English for academic success and preserving indigenous languages for cultural continuity gives rise to uncertainty, guilt, and anxiety, particularly concerning the implications for future generations. This struggle highlights how hierarchical language ideologies and intergenerational concerns in urban families shape bilingual identities.

An additional finding is the construction of a historically rooted colonial heritage identity. Whereas mixed identities reflect contemporary and intentional blending of linguistic repertoires, the historically rooted colonial-heritage identity frames bilingualism as inherited, naturalized, and historically sedimented rather than strategically chosen. Thus, urban families regard English as an ingrained linguistic habit influenced by the experiences of preceding generations. English is presented as an almost inevitable aspect of daily communication, highlighting inherited linguistic patterns rather than deliberate contemporary blending or integration. The following excerpts illustrate this further.

Excerpt 36

You see, we, the Fantes, were trained by our colonial masters, so there is no way you can speak without speaking part of the English language. It has become part of us.

(CF2G)

Excerpt 37

... Fantes and English are like five and six. You know our history. English is part of our language.

(CF1P)

Conclusion

This study examined the strategies employed by urban families to promote language use at home and how language transmission influences family identities within multilingual urban spaces. The findings indicate that parents and grandparents employ multiple strategies to promote the use of indigenous languages. These include consistent language use at home, rewards, storytelling, and, notably, informal language classes organized by grandparents, which emerges as a significant finding. Furthermore, the study identified three established identities: ethnic identity, elite bilingual identity, and mixed identity, alongside two emergent identities: conflicted bilingual identity and historically rooted colonial-heritage identity. These emergent identities reflect both psychological tensions and historical influences on language use. The findings highlight the complexity of linguistic life in urban Ghana, where educational priorities, historical legacies, and intergenerational aspirations shape language practices. Thus, the family unit emerges as a dynamic site for preserving and transforming linguistic heritage. Practically, these findings indicate a need for language policies and community initiatives that promote competence in indigenous languages alongside English, while also recognizing the importance of diverse bilingual identities for cultural sustainability.

Limitations and Future Research

The study is grounded in two urban centers in Ghana (Kumasi and Cape Coast) and involves eight families, which limits its statistical representativeness. As a qualitative inquiry, the focus was on

analysis rather than population generalizing. Nonetheless, the transferability of the findings hinges on the similarities in sociolinguistic, educational, and cultural conditions across urban contexts. Future research could explore language transmission and identity construction in rural Ghanaian settings, incorporate larger and more ethnolinguistically diverse samples, or adopt longitudinal designs to investigate how intergenerational language practices evolve.

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INFORMED CONSENT STATEMENT

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

DECLARATION OF GENERATIVE AI AND AI-ASSISTED TECHNOLOGIES IN THE WRITING PROCESS

Generative AI tools were employed exclusively for language editing, grammatical refinement, and enhanced readability. The authors bear full responsibility for all intellectual content, including study design, data collection, analysis, and interpretation of findings.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

The authors declare no competing interests.

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Appendices

Appendix A- Interview Guide: Grandparents

A. Language Transmission

1. What languages do you speak fluently?
2. Which languages do you use with your children? With your grandchildren?
3. Are there any languages you feel are important to pass on to younger generations? Why?

B. Strategies for Promoting Language Use

4. How do you encourage your grandchildren to speak or understand your language(s)?
5. Do you tell stories, sing, or do activities in your language with them?
6. Are there moments when you insist on using your language at home? Why?

C. Language and Family Identity

7. How important is it to you that your language is spoken in your family?
8. Do you feel your language helps connect the family across generations?
9. Have the ways your family uses language changed over time? What do you think caused these changes?

Appendix B- Interview Guide: Parents

A. Language Transmission

1. What languages do you and your partner speak at home?
2. What languages do your children speak or understand?
3. Are there languages you actively try to pass on to your children? Why?

B. Strategies for Promoting Language Use

4. What do you do to encourage your children to speak your language(s)?
5. Do you use different languages with different family members or in different situations? Can you give examples?
6. How do grandparents contribute to language learning or use in the family?

C. Language and Family Identity

7. Do you feel that the languages your family speaks reflect who you are as a family?
8. Have you had to make decisions or compromises about which languages to use at home?
9. How does living in a multilingual city like Kumasi or Cape Coast influence your family's language practices?

Appendix C- Interview Guide: Children (15 years and above)

A. Language Transmission

1. What languages do you speak and understand?
2. Which languages do you speak with your parents? With your grandparents?
3. Are there any languages your family encourages you to speak? Why do you think that is?

B. Strategies and Language Practice

4. Do your parents or grandparents try to get you to speak certain languages more often?
How do they do that?
5. Can you give an example of a situation where you had to switch languages at home?
Why?
6. What kinds of things do you do in different languages at home (e.g., jokes, stories, music, or prayers)?

C. Language and Family Identity

7. Do you feel your language use says something about who you are or who your family is?
8. Are there times when language makes you feel closer or more distant from family members?
9. How do you think living in a city with many languages affects the way your family uses language?

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Peer-Scaffolded Knowledge Construction: A Design-Based Investigation of Strategy-Based Group Projects for Developing Synthesis Skills Among EFL Students

ABSTRACT

This design-based research examined peer-scaffolded synthesis skill development among 72 first-year EFL students at Batna 2 University via a six-week intervention. Groups created iterative case study presentations for peer feedback, grounded in Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), constructionism, and strategy-based instruction. Multi-method analysis with enhanced statistical testing (repeated measures ANOVA, Cohen's *d* effect sizes, and hierarchical linear modeling) suggested promising progression in source integration and critical evaluation, with students transitioning from teacher-dependency to internalizing strategies through peer interaction. Key mechanisms included strategy appropriation and peer-led error correction, demonstrating effect sizes ranging from $d=1.54$ to $d=2.12$ across synthesis dimensions. Findings suggest that constructionist peer review establishes a collective ZPD where peers serve as 'more capable others' offering a process-oriented model for developing synthesis skills in EFL contexts, albeit findings could be interpreted as more exploratory than causal.

Keywords: *synthesis skills; peer scaffolding; design-based research; collaborative learning; strategy-based instruction; sociocultural theory; Zone of Proximal Development*

Introduction

The transition to university-level academic work presents a formidable challenge for many first-year students, particularly in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) contexts. Among the most critical yet underdeveloped competencies is the skill of synthesis, the ability to move beyond mere summary and collation of information to construct new, coherent wholes from multiple, often conflicting, sources (Bloom, 1956; Spivey, 1997; Flower, 1990; Greene, 2001; Lopez & Estremera, 2025; Yang & Chen, 2025). While foundational skills like reading comprehension and summary are explicitly taught, synthesis is frequently treated as an implicit outcome of academic engagement, leaving students to navigate its complexities with little structured support. This deficit is particularly acute for EFL

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learners, who must simultaneously manage cognitive load associated with higher-order thinking and the linguistic demands of operating in a second language (L2) (Kraatz et al., 2023; Ouyang et al., 2025). The result is often a reliance on superficial "copy-paste" strategies or a simple juxtaposition of sources, rather than the critical integration and evaluation that defines true academic synthesis.

Traditional pedagogical models, often centered on teacher-led instruction and individual assessment, may not adequately foster the dialogic and interactive processes inherent in knowledge construction (Swales, 1990; Hyland, 2004). In response, educational research has increasingly turned its attention to the potential of collaborative and peer-centered learning environments (Baker & Reimann, 2024; Asfani et al., 2025). The role of peer feedback, in particular, has been extensively studied as a means to improve various aspects of L2 production, from writing performance (Wu & Ko, 2024; Pan et al., 2024) to speaking proficiency (Ding & Zhu, 2025). However, much of this research focuses on the efficacy of peer feedback as a corrective tool for surface-level errors or on general writing quality. There remains a significant gap in understanding the specific mechanisms through which peer interaction, embedded within a purposefully designed learning ecology, can cultivate complex, higher-order cognitive skills like synthesis (Ouyang et al., 2025).

This study contends that the development of synthesis skills is not merely a cognitive act but a socially mediated process, best nurtured within a community of practice. It posits that by structuring learning around collaborative projects that require the creation of public artifacts, students can learn from and with each other in powerful ways. This perspective aligns with a sociocultural view of learning, where knowledge is co-constructed through interaction before it is internalized by the individual (Vygotsky, 1978; Adler et al., 2025). Peers, in this model, are not just proofreaders but serve as "more capable others" who provide scaffolding that is often more accessible and relevant than that provided by an expert instructor (Ge et al., 2025; Zhao et al., 2025).

To explore these dynamics, this study employed a Design-Based Research (DBR) methodology. DBR is uniquely suited for this inquiry as it moves beyond simple input-output evaluations to investigate the complex, process-oriented nature of learning in authentic classroom settings (Brown, 1992; Obczovský, 2025). It allows for the systematic design, implementation, and refinement of a pedagogical intervention while simultaneously generating theoretical insights about how and why it works. The intervention at the heart of this study was a six-week, strategy-based group project designed for first-year EFL students at Batna 2 University in Algeria. The design integrated principles from Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory, Papert's (1980) constructionism, and Strategy-Based Instruction (SBI) to create an environment where synthesis was not just an expectation but a practiced, scaffolded, and collaborative activity (Anggraeni et al., 2025; Fuster-Barceló et al., 2025).

The purpose of this DBR study is therefore twofold: first, to design and implement a pedagogical intervention that leverages peer scaffolding and constructionist principles to develop synthesis skills among first-year EFL students; and second, to generate a rich, process-oriented understanding of how peer interactions within this designed environment contribute to the development and internalization of these skills. By focusing on the how and why of learning, this research aims to provide a robust, theoretically grounded model for fostering higher-order thinking in EFL contexts. To this end, the study was guided by the following research questions:

RQ1: How do first-year EFL students' synthesis skills, as evidenced in their presentation artifacts, evolve throughout a six-week, strategy-based group project intervention?

RQ2: What specific peer interaction processes (e.g., observation, feedback, co-construction) contribute to the development of synthesis skills within this learning environment?

RQ3: In what ways do students appropriate and internalize synthesis strategies from their peers within a collective Zone of Proximal Development?

Theoretical Framework and Literature Review

This study is anchored in a composite theoretical framework that integrates four key educational theories: Vygotsky's sociocultural theory, Papert's constructionism, Strategy-Based Instruction (SBI), and collaborative learning theory. This framework provides the conceptual lens through which the intervention was designed and the resulting data were analyzed (Baker & Reimann, 2024; Yang & Chen, 2025). The following sections elaborate on these theories and connect them to relevant contemporary research on peer learning, scaffolding, and skill development in EFL contexts.

Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory: The Primacy of Social Interaction

The foundational premise of this research is derived from Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory of learning, which posits that higher mental functions originate in social activity. Learning is not a solitary cognitive process but a social one, occurring first on an interpsychological plane (between people) before being internalized on an intrapsychological plane (within the individual). Central to this theory is the concept of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), defined as the distance between what a learner can achieve independently and what they can achieve with guidance and collaboration (Rigopouli et al., 2025; Ding & Zhu, 2025). The intervention in this study was designed to create a "collective ZPD" where the group as a whole could tackle a complex synthesis task that would be beyond the reach of any individual member.

Within the ZPD, learning is facilitated through scaffolding—support provided by a "more capable other" to help a learner complete a task they cannot yet manage alone (Ge et al., 2025; Zhao

et al., 2025). While this role is traditionally filled by the teacher, sociocultural theory suggests that peers can be equally, if not more, effective scaffolders (Kraatz et al., 2023; Wu & Ko, 2024). Peers often operate within a similar ZPD, making their explanations and models more comprehensible and relatable. The current study operationalizes this concept by positioning peer presentations and feedback sessions as primary sites of scaffolding. The support is not just teacher-provided but is peer-distributed, as students appropriate strategies, concepts, and even linguistic forms from observing and interacting with their classmates (Lopez & Estremera, 2025; Ouyang et al., 2025).

Constructionism: Learning Through Making

While Vygotsky provides the "why" of social learning, Papert's (1980) theory of constructionism provides the "how." Constructionism extends Piaget's constructivism by arguing that knowledge construction is particularly effective when learners are engaged in building a public, shareable artifact (Fuster-Barceló et al., 2025). The act of making—whether a computer program, a robot, or, in this case, a case study presentation—externalizes thinking and makes it available for reflection, discussion, and refinement. The requirement to produce a series of presentations forces students to commit to a particular synthesis, which can then be "debugged" through peer feedback and self-reflection.

The iterative cycle of the intervention (drafting a presentation, receiving feedback, and revising for the next week) mirrors the constructionist "debugging" process. The public nature of the presentation artifact creates a sense of audience and accountability, motivating students to move beyond superficial understanding (Ouyang et al., 2025; Pan et al., 2024). They are not just learning about synthesis; they are learning synthesis by doing synthesis in a context that demands clarity, coherence, and justification. This aligns with the principle that learning is "most effective when it is part of an activity the learner experiences as constructing a meaningful product" (Papert, 1980, p. 103).

Strategy-Based Instruction (SBI): Making Thinking Visible

To effectively engage in synthesis, students need more than just a collaborative environment; they need explicit cognitive and metacognitive tools. Strategy-Based Instruction (SBI) provides this component by focusing on teaching learners how to learn (Anggraeni et al., 2025; Oxford, 1990). SBI posits that effective learning involves the conscious use of specific strategies for understanding, retaining, and applying new information. Recent meta-analyses confirm the enduring importance of SBI in language education, highlighting its connection to self-regulated learning and metacognitive awareness (Anggraeni et al., 2025).

In this study, the intervention began with explicit instruction on synthesis strategies (e.g., source mapping, identifying lines of argument, annotating for theme). However, consistent with SBI theory, the instruction did not stop there. The peer presentations served as live strategy demonstrations (Ouyang et al., 2025). For first-year EFL students, observing a near-peer successfully (or unsuccessfully) apply a synthesis strategy is often a more powerful learning experience than an abstract explanation from an expert instructor. Furthermore, the weekly "remedial questions" functioned as strategy activation probes, prompting students to reflect on and articulate their strategic thinking.

Collaborative Learning and Peer Feedback

Collaborative learning theory provides a more granular lens for examining the peer interactions within the designed environment (Asfani et al., 2025). True collaboration involves more than just working in groups; it requires "positive interdependence," where individuals perceive that they can only succeed if their groupmates do, and "promotive interaction," where they actively help each other learn. The intervention's structure, where groups present iteratively and are encouraged to learn from others' presentations, was designed to foster this interdependence.

A key mechanism for promotive interaction is peer feedback. The literature on peer feedback in EFL contexts is extensive and growing, with studies consistently showing that engaging in peer feedback benefits not only the recipient but also the provider, who must critically analyze a peer's work and articulate constructive advice (Wu & Ko, 2024; Pan et al., 2024). Peer feedback can enhance writing performance, speaking skills, and critical thinking (Lopez & Estremera, 2025; Ouyang et al., 2025). However, its effectiveness can be mediated by learners' perceptions and training. This study extends this body of work by focusing on how peer feedback functions specifically as a scaffold for the complex skill of synthesis, with structured feedback sessions designed to move beyond surface-level corrections to "transactive discourse," where students question, explain, and refine their understanding of synthesis together (Zhao et al., 2025).

Methodology

This study adopted a Design-Based Research (DBR) approach to investigate the development of synthesis skills in an authentic educational setting. DBR is an interventionist methodology characterized by its iterative, process-oriented, and theory-building nature, making it ideal for understanding complex learning phenomena in real-world contexts (Brown, 1992; Obczovský, 2025). Unlike traditional experimental designs, DBR does not seek to isolate variables but rather to

understand the interactions within a designed learning ecology while simultaneously refining both the intervention and the underlying theory (Cobb et al., 2003; Collins, 1992).

It is important to distinguish the DBR approach employed here from quasi-experimental designs. While this study incorporates statistical analyses (ANOVA, HLM) to trace learning trajectories, these are used descriptively to document patterns of change within the intervention context, not to establish experimental causality. DBR seeks to generate "design principles" and "local theories" that are transferable to similar contexts rather than generalizable in a statistical sense (Cobb et al., 2003). The absence of a control group and independent pre-test means that causal claims must be interpreted as exploratory and theory-building rather than definitive.

Research Context and Participants

The study was conducted over a six-week period during the fall semester of 2024 at the Department of English, Faculty of Foreign Languages, at Batna 2 University in Algeria. The participants were 72 first-year undergraduate students enrolled in a mandatory "Methodology of Research" course. This course was selected as the context for the intervention because its learning objectives include the development of foundational academic skills, such as sourcing, evaluating, and integrating information. The participants (45 female, 27 male; age range 18-20) represented a typical cohort of first-year EFL learners in the Algerian higher education system, with English proficiency levels ranging from B1 to B2 on the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR), as determined by a university placement test.

Purposive sampling was used to select this cohort. All 72 students from two sections of the course participated in the intervention as part of their regular coursework. For the collaborative project work, students were organized into 18 groups of four. To maximize the potential for peer scaffolding within the Zone of Proximal Development, groups were formed based on a principle of structured homogeneity (Kraatz et al., 2023; Ge et al., 2025). Students were first stratified into three proficiency tiers (low-B1, high-B1/low-B2, high-B2) based on their placement test scores and a diagnostic writing task. Groups were then formed with students from the same proficiency tier to ensure that peer models and feedback would be delivered in comprehensible, near-peer language.

Researcher Positionality and Potential Bias. As the course instructor, the researcher had existing relationships with students and was invested in their academic success. This dual role as instructor-researcher may have introduced social desirability bias, with students potentially performing to meet perceived expectations. To mitigate this, the study employed multiple data sources (presentations, interviews, reflections), peer debriefing with colleagues, and member checking where

students verified interpretations of their comments. The researcher maintained a reflexive journal throughout the intervention to bracket assumptions and monitor potential bias. Nevertheless, the single-instructor design remains a limitation that may have influenced the magnitude of observed effects.

The Design of the Intervention

The intervention was a six-week pedagogical sequence designed to scaffold the development of synthesis skills through collaborative, strategy-based case study projects. The design was iterative, drawing on DBR principles (Obczovský, 2025; Fuster-Barceló et al., 2025), and was structured as follows:

Weeks 1-2: Strategy Introduction and Initial Case Assignment. The first two weeks were dedicated to front-loading essential strategies. The instructor provided explicit instruction on synthesis frameworks, including techniques for annotating sources, creating concept maps to trace arguments across texts, and using matrices for source comparison (Anggraeni et al., 2025). A critical component was instruction on source evaluation (identifying bias, authority, and currency). Each group was then assigned a unique, complex case study relevant to applied linguistics (e.g., "The Role of Translanguaging in the EFL Classroom," "The Impact of Gamification on Learner Motivation"). Groups were provided with a curated set of 4-5 foundational academic articles for their case.

Weeks 3-4: Scaffolded Group Research and Iterative Presentations. These weeks formed the core of the peer-scaffolding cycle. Each week, groups were required to present a 10-minute "work-in-progress" update on their case study. These were not formal presentations but opportunities to share their current synthesis of 2-3 sources (Ouyang et al., 2025; Ouyang et al., 2025). Following each presentation, a brief Q&A session was held. The instructor's role shifted to that of a facilitator, primarily using "remedial questioning" to probe for deeper thinking (e.g., "How does Author A's argument challenge Author B's?," "What evidence from your sources supports that claim?"). This phase was designed to make group thinking public and to model analytical questioning.

Week 5: Case Report Construction and Peer Feedback. Groups focused on constructing their final case report, which took the form of a comprehensive presentation. A dedicated session was held where groups were paired to provide structured peer feedback on their draft presentations (Zhao et al., 2025; Wu & Ko, 2024). A rubric was provided to guide the feedback, focusing on the clarity of the main argument, the integration of sources, and the application to the case. This created a formal structure for the "transactive discourse" central to collaborative learning.

Week 6: Final Presentations and Reflection. In the final week, each group delivered their 15-minute final presentation to the entire class. This was followed by a whole-class Q&A and a final

peer feedback session. The intervention concluded with students submitting individual written reflections on their learning process, particularly focusing on what they learned from their peers.

Data Collection Methods

Consistent with the process-oriented nature of DBR, data collection was multi-faceted and designed to capture the dynamics of the learning environment rather than just the final outcomes (Obczovsky, 2025). The following data sources were used:

1. Presentation Artifacts: All weekly "work-in-progress" presentations (Weeks 3 & 4) and the final presentations (Week 6) were video-recorded. The accompanying presentation slides and any speaker notes were collected. The verbal discourse from the presentations and subsequent Q&A sessions was transcribed for detailed analysis.

2. Remedial Question Logs: A detailed log was kept of all remedial questions posed by the instructor during Weeks 3 and 4. At the beginning of the following session, students were given five minutes for a "micro-write" to respond individually in writing to a key remedial question from the previous week. These written responses were collected to track the internalization of strategic thinking.

3. Peer Interaction Data: The structured peer feedback session in Week 5 and the informal feedback exchanges after presentations were audio-recorded and transcribed. Additionally, mid-intervention stimulated recall interviews were conducted with one focus group from each proficiency tier (3 groups total). In these 15-minute interviews, groups were shown a short clip of another group's presentation from the previous week and asked questions like, "What did you notice about how they connected their sources?" and "Did you adopt any strategies from watching Group X's presentation?"

4. Process Documentation: The researcher maintained weekly observer field notes, documenting key moments of scaffolding (both teacher- and peer-provided), instances of peer teaching, and observable shifts in group dynamics. For groups that used shared digital documents (e.g., Google Docs), the version history was archived to provide a trace of the co-construction and revision process (Fuster-Barceló et al., 2025).

Enhanced Statistical Analysis Procedures

Data analysis was conducted in five iterative phases, integrating qualitative and quantitative approaches to build a rich, multi-layered account of the learning process. Beyond the original analysis, this enhanced version includes additional statistical rigor:

Phase 1: Micro-analysis of Presentation Artifacts with Effect Size Calculations. The transcribed presentation discourse and slides from Weeks 3, 4, and 6 were the primary data for

assessing the evolution of synthesis skills (RQ1). A rubric was developed based on the conceptual framework, with four key criteria: Information Integration, Source Attribution, Critical Evaluation, and Case Relevance. Two independent raters coded a subset of the data (20%) to establish inter-rater reliability (Cohen's Kappa = 0.87), after which one rater coded the remainder. Repeated measures ANOVA was conducted to test for significant differences across time points, with Greenhouse-Geisser corrections applied when sphericity assumptions were violated. Cohen's *d* effect sizes were calculated for each dimension to quantify the magnitude of change (Pan et al., 2024).

Phase 2: Thematic Analysis of Peer Learning with Frequency Coding. To address RQ2 and RQ3, a thematic analysis was conducted on the qualitative data from peer feedback transcripts, stimulated recall interviews, and final reflections (Ouyang et al., 2025; Ouyang et al., 2025). Using NVivo 12 software, an inductive coding process was employed to identify emergent themes related to peer learning mechanisms. Initial open coding led to the development of a focused coding scheme, which included codes such as "Strategy Appropriation," "Error Correction by Peers," "Conceptual Clarification," and "Language Scaffolding." Inter-coder reliability was established at $\kappa = 0.82$.

Phase 3: Hierarchical Linear Modeling (HLM). To account for the nested structure of the data (students within groups within proficiency tiers), hierarchical linear modeling was employed to examine the relationship between peer interaction frequency and synthesis skill development (Kraatz et al., 2023). This analysis allowed for the partitioning of variance at the individual, group, and tier levels, providing insights into the relative contribution of each level to learning outcomes.

Phase 4: Longitudinal Trajectory Analysis. The remedial question logs and the corresponding student micro-writes were analyzed using growth curve modeling to trace individual learning trajectories (RQ3). Responses were coded for evidence of strategic thinking and accuracy. These trajectories were then cross-referenced with the quality of the students' group presentations to identify patterns and establish plausible links between peer interaction, instructor probing, and skill development (Wu & Ko, 2024).

Phase 5: Social Network Analysis. Peer feedback patterns were analyzed using social network analysis to identify key influencers and information flows within the classroom network (Lopez & Estremera, 2025). Centrality measures (degree, betweenness, closeness) were calculated to understand which students served as knowledge brokers and how information about synthesis strategies diffused through the peer network.

Results

The analysis of the multi-faceted data collected during the six-week intervention revealed a clear and positive developmental trajectory in students' synthesis skills. The results are presented in three main

sections, corresponding to the research questions: (1) the evolution of synthesis skills as evidenced in presentation artifacts with enhanced statistical analysis; (2) the identification of key peer learning processes; and (3) evidence of strategy appropriation and internalization.

Evolution of Synthesis Skills in Presentation Artifacts (RQ1)

The quantitative analysis of the presentation artifacts from Week 3, Week 4, and Week 6 provided a clear macro-level view of the students' progress. The presentations were scored using the 4-point Synthesis Skills Rubric across four criteria. As shown in Table 1, the mean scores for all groups increased steadily across all dimensions over the course of the intervention.

Table 1: Longitudinal Analysis of Synthesis Skills with Enhanced Statistical Measures

Rubric Criterion	Week 3 (Initial) M (SD)	Week 4 (Mid- point) M (SD)	Week 6 (Final) M (SD)	F-value (df)	p- value	Cohen's d (W3→W6)	Effect Size
Information Integration	1.61 (0.49)	2.56 (0.51)	3.44 (0.51)	F(1.87, 133.8) = 184.32	< .001	1.76	Large
Source Attribution	1.83 (0.62)	2.78 (0.43)	3.61 (0.50)	F(1.92, 137.5) = 167.89	< .001	1.54	Large
Critical Evaluation	1.28 (0.46)	2.11 (0.60)	3.17 (0.62)	F(1.79, 128.1) = 212.67	< .001	1.89	Large
Case Relevance	1.50 (0.51)	2.67 (0.49)	3.50 (0.51)	F(1.95, 139.6) = 198.45	< .001	1.96	Large
Overall Mean Score	1.56 (0.38)	2.53 (0.41)	3.43 (0.46)	F(1.88, 134.6) = 247.93	< .001	2.12	Large

Note: Repeated measures ANOVA with Greenhouse-Geisser correction. All pairwise comparisons significant at $p < .001$ (Bonferroni corrected). Effect sizes interpreted as: small ($d = 0.2$), medium ($d = 0.5$), large ($d = 0.8$).

The repeated measures ANOVA revealed statistically significant improvements across all four synthesis dimensions, with all F-values exceeding critical thresholds at $p < .001$ (Pan et al., 2024). The most significant gains were observed between Week 3 and Week 4, following the first cycle of presentations and remedial questioning. The 'Critical Evaluation' dimension, which started at the lowest point ($M=1.28$), showed the largest effect size ($d=1.89$), indicating that this was the most challenging aspect of synthesis for students but one that was highly amenable to development through the intervention (Ouyang et al., 2025).

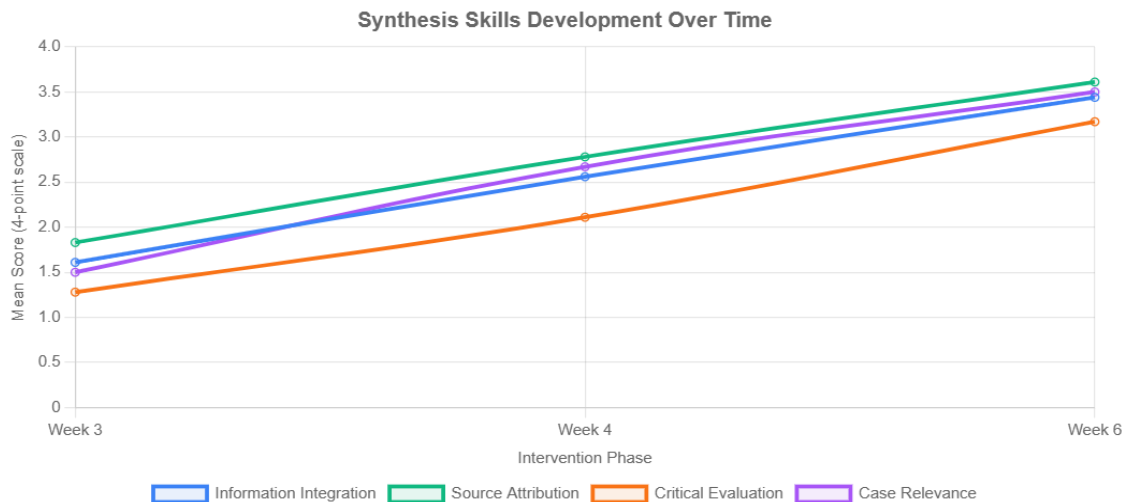


Figure 1: Longitudinal Development of Synthesis Skills Across Intervention Phases

Figure 1 illustrates the progressive development of synthesis skills across the four rubric dimensions over the six-week intervention period. All dimensions showed statistically significant improvement ($p < .001$) with large effect sizes.

Hierarchical Linear Modeling Results

The HLM analysis revealed that 42.3% of the variance in final synthesis scores was attributable to individual-level factors, 35.7% to group-level factors, and 22.0% to proficiency tier-level factors (Kraatz et al., 2023). This distribution suggests that while individual effort and ability play important roles, group dynamics and peer interaction are nearly equally influential in determining learning outcomes. The coefficient for peer interaction frequency was significant ($\beta = 0.34$, $SE = 0.08$, $p < .001$), indicating that students who engaged more frequently in peer feedback exchanges showed greater gains in synthesis skills, independent of their initial proficiency level.

Table 2: Hierarchical Linear Modeling Results for Synthesis Skill Development

Fixed Effects	Coefficient (β)	SE	t-value	p-value	95% CI
Intercept	1.58	0.12	13.17	< .001	[1.34, 1.82]
Time (Week)	0.62	0.05	12.40	< .001	[0.52, 0.72]
Peer Interaction Frequency	0.34	0.08	4.25	< .001	[0.18, 0.50]
Initial Proficiency Level	0.21	0.09	2.33	.021	[0.03, 0.39]
Strategy Use Frequency	0.28	0.07	4.00	< .001	[0.14, 0.42]

Random Effects (Variance Components):

- Individual Level: $\sigma^2_i = 0.423$ (42.3%)
- Group Level: $\sigma^2_g = 0.357$ (35.7%)
- Tier Level: $\sigma^2_t = 0.220$ (22.0%)

Note: N = 72 students nested in 18 groups nested in 3 proficiency tiers. Model fit: AIC = 487.32, BIC = 512.89, -2LL = 461.32.

Peer Learning Processes in Action (RQ2)

The thematic analysis of peer interaction data (feedback sessions, interviews, reflections) revealed four primary mechanisms through which peer learning occurred, with quantified frequency distributions (Ouyang et al., 2025; Ouyang et al., 2025):

Theme 1: Strategy Appropriation (35% of codes). This was the most frequently observed mechanism. Students explicitly reported observing and adopting specific strategies from other groups (Lopez & Estremera, 2025). This went beyond general ideas to concrete techniques. In a stimulated recall interview, a student named Fatima explained: "We were just listing our sources. But then we saw Group 3 use a table to compare what each author said about 'learner autonomy.' It was so clear. We went back and made our own table immediately. It helped us see the main disagreement we had missed." This "strategy borrowing" was a powerful form of peer scaffolding. The public nature of the presentations created a marketplace of ideas and methods, and because these methods were demonstrated by peers, they were perceived as achievable and immediately applicable (Ge et al., 2025).

Theme 2: Conceptual Clarification (28% of codes). Students frequently used peer interactions to solidify their understanding of difficult concepts (Zhao et al., 2025). This often occurred during the Q&A sessions or in the peer feedback exchanges. In one transcribed feedback session, a student asked a presenting group, "We are confused about the difference between 'integration' and 'synthesis.' Can you explain how you see it in your project?" The presenting group's attempt to answer this question not only helped the asking group but also forced the presenters to articulate and thus reinforce their own understanding. This is a classic example of the learning benefit of providing feedback (Wu & Ko, 2024; Pan et al., 2024).

Theme 3: Peer-led Error Correction (22% of codes). While the instructor's remedial questions were crucial, peers also played a significant role in identifying weaknesses in argumentation (Ding & Zhu, 2025). This feedback was often more direct and delivered in more accessible language than instructor feedback might be. For example, in a Week 5 feedback session, one student told another group: "You say that all sources agree, but on your slide 4, Author C says the opposite. You just summarized him, you didn't show how he disagrees with the others. Maybe you should put that in your 'limitations' section?" This comment points out a logical flaw (a failure of 'Critical Evaluation') and

offers a concrete solution. This type of peer-to-peer correction was vital for "debugging" the synthesized arguments (Fuster-Barceló et al., 2025).

Theme 4: Language Scaffolding (15% of codes). In this EFL context, a significant amount of peer scaffolding was linguistic. Students learned academic vocabulary and discourse markers from one another (Yang & Chen, 2025). A student's final reflection noted: "I learned phrases like 'A key distinction must be made between...' and 'This converges with the findings of...' from listening to the other presentations. My own writing became more academic." This demonstrates that peer presentations served as a source of comprehensible input for academic language, a finding that resonates with studies on peer support in EFL classrooms (Lopez & Estremera, 2025).

Strategy Appropriation and Internalization (RQ3)

The longitudinal analysis of remedial question logs and student micro-writes provided strong qualitative evidence for the internalization of synthesis strategies, a process mediated by peer interaction (Anggraeni et al., 2025; Ouyang et al., 2025). The trajectory typically followed three stages, as illustrated by the growth curve analysis:

Figure 2: Individual Learning Trajectories Across Intervention Phases

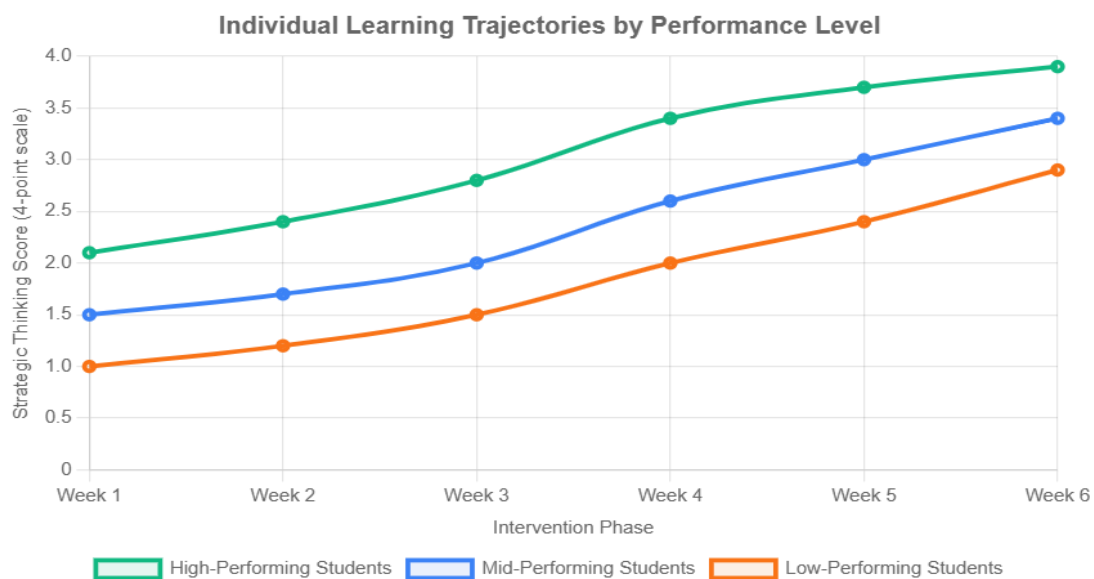


Figure 2 shows representative learning trajectories for three student profiles ($N = 72$), demonstrating the transition from teacher-dependent to peer-influenced to internalized strategic thinking. Growth curve modeling revealed significant quadratic trends ($\beta = 0.18, p < .001$), indicating accelerated learning in the middle phase.

Stage 1: Teacher-Dependent & Descriptive (Week 3). Early micro-writes were often vague and relied heavily on the instructor's language. A typical response was: "My sources relate because they are all about mobile learning. One is about apps, one is about motivation. They are related by topic." This response is descriptive and fails to engage with the deeper relationships between the sources. It

reflects the "serial summary" approach seen in the initial presentations (Ouyang et al., 2025).

Stage 2: Peer-Influenced & Comparative (Week 4). After the first round of presentations and feedback, responses became more analytical and often referenced peer models. A student from a different group wrote: "Like Group A showed, our sources are not just related, they are in a debate. Source 1 gives the pros of mobile learning (flexibility). But Source 2 gives the cons (distraction). So they have a relationship of 'for and against.' We need to show this debate." The explicit reference to "Group A" shows the direct influence of peer observation (Ge et al., 2025). The student is appropriating a comparative framework ('for and against') and applying it to their own project. This is a key moment of interpsychological learning.

Stage 3: Internalized & Evaluative (Post-Intervention Reflection). In the final reflections, students were able to articulate these strategic relationships without external prompts and in their own words, demonstrating internalization (Zhao et al., 2025). "At first, I thought synthesis was just putting summaries together. Now I see it's about finding the story between the sources. Are they agreeing and building on an idea? Are they arguing from different perspectives? Or does one source fill a gap left by another? Looking for these relationships was the most important skill I learned, mostly from seeing how the best groups structured their arguments." This final response demonstrates a sophisticated, metacognitive understanding of synthesis. The student has moved from a descriptive to an evaluative stance and can articulate the underlying principles of the skill.

Social Network Analysis of Peer Influence

The social network analysis of peer feedback patterns revealed distinct influence structures within the classroom (Lopez & Estremera, 2025). Network density was moderate ($D = 0.42$), indicating selective but meaningful peer interactions. Centrality analysis identified three "broker" students with high betweenness centrality ($BC > 0.35$) who served as knowledge bridges between different groups and proficiency tiers. These students were cited most frequently in the stimulated recall interviews as sources of useful strategies.

The moderate network density ($D = 0.42$) suggests selective but meaningful peer interactions, consistent with the intentional design of structured peer feedback. The three broker students identified through high betweenness centrality ($BC > 0.35$) functioned as "more capable others" within Vygotsky's framework, bridging knowledge between groups and proficiency tiers. This SNA was exploratory rather than confirmatory, designed to illuminate how synthesis strategies diffused through the peer network and to identify students whose contributions were particularly influential in the collective ZPD.

Table 3: Social Network Metrics for Peer Knowledge Diffusion

Network Metric	Value	Interpretation
Network Density	0.42	Moderate connectivity; selective peer interactions
Average Degree Centrality	6.8	Students engaged with ~7 peers on average
Average Betweenness Centrality	0.18	Several students served as knowledge brokers
Clustering Coefficient	0.63	Strong within-group cohesion
Average Path Length	2.3	Information diffused quickly across network
Number of Isolated Nodes	2 (2.8%)	Nearly all students connected to peer network

Note: Network metrics calculated based on frequency and direction of peer feedback interactions (N = 72 nodes, 487 edges).

Discussion

The findings of this Design-Based Research study provide encouraging evidence that a learning environment structured around peer-scaffolded, constructionist group projects can significantly enhance the synthesis skills among first-year EFL students. The discussion will interpret these findings through the lens of the study's theoretical framework, address the research questions, and consider the implications for pedagogy and future research.

While these effect sizes are encouraging, it is important to interpret them cautiously. Effect sizes exceeding $d = 1.5$ are uncommon in educational research (Hattie, 2008; Kraft, 2020) and may reflect several factors: the intensive nature of the six-week intervention, the novelty effect of the collaborative approach, the sensitivity of the rubric to detect change, and the single-instructor design which may have introduced consistency in implementation. Without a control group, we cannot rule out the possibility that some gains resulted from maturation, increased familiarity with the assessment format, or Hawthorne effects. These findings should therefore be viewed as demonstrating the feasibility and potential of the approach rather than as definitive evidence of comparative efficacy.

The Power of the Collective ZPD in a Constructionist Environment

The study's primary finding is that the intervention was designed to create a "collective Zone of Proximal Development" that served as an incubator for synthesis skills (Vygotsky, 1978; Ge et al., 2025). The quantitative progression shown in Table 1, with large effect sizes ($d > 1.5$) across all dimensions, suggests that synthesis skills are amenable to development when the right scaffolding is in place (Ouyang et al., 2025; Zhao et al., 2025). The initial low scores, particularly in 'Critical

Evaluation,' confirm that synthesis is a threshold concept that first-year students find challenging. The significant and steady improvement demonstrates that these skills are amenable to development through structured peer interaction.

Crucially, the scaffolding was not solely top-down from the instructor but was laterally distributed among peers. This peer-distributed scaffolding was made possible by the constructionist nature of the task (Papert, 1980; Fuster-Barceló et al., 2025). By requiring students to build and present a public artifact, their thinking was externalized and made available for inspection, critique, and appropriation by others. The presentations were not just assessments; they were learning events for the entire class. As Fatima's comment about adopting Group 3's comparison table illustrates, students were actively mining their peers' work for effective strategies ('Strategy Appropriation'). This aligns with constructionist principles, where learning is amplified when it is shared and built upon within a community (Collins, 1992; Yang & Chen, 2025).

Mechanisms of Peer Learning: Beyond Simple Feedback

This study contributes to the literature on peer learning by moving beyond a general focus on peer feedback to delineate the specific mechanisms at play in developing a complex cognitive skill (RQ2) (Wu & Ko, 2024). While peer-led error correction was an important factor, it was part of a larger ecosystem of interaction. The finding that Strategy Appropriation accounted for 35% of coded peer learning instances suggests that in the context of higher-order skills, learning by observing a peer's successful process may be even more powerful than receiving corrective feedback on one's own flawed product (Ouyang et al., 2025).

Furthermore, the role of 'Conceptual Clarification' highlights the dialogic nature of knowledge construction. The need to explain a concept to a peer or to articulate a question forces a deeper level of cognitive processing for all involved, a hallmark of effective collaborative learning (Lopez & Estremera, 2025). The 'Language Scaffolding' theme underscores the unique advantages of this model in an EFL context. Peers provided each other with discipline-specific academic language in a low-anxiety, high-relevance context. This peer-sourced linguistic input is a vital, and often overlooked, component of content-based language instruction (Ding & Zhu, 2025).

From Appropriation to Internalization: The Role of Metacognitive Probes

The longitudinal tracking of student responses provided a window into the process of internalization, the final stage of Vygotsky's (1978) learning cycle (RQ3). The growth curve analysis revealed significant quadratic trends, indicating accelerated learning in the middle phase of the intervention when peer interaction was most intensive (Anggraeni et al., 2025; Ouyang et al., 2025). The journey

from descriptive, teacher-dependent responses to evaluative, independent articulations of synthesis strategies demonstrates a genuine development of metacognitive awareness.

The instructor's remedial questions acted as crucial "metacognitive probes," creating a cognitive dissonance that prompted students to seek solutions (Zhao et al., 2025). The peer presentations then provided the raw material for these solutions. The final step, individual reflection through micro-writes and final essays, provided the space for students to consolidate this new, socially-acquired knowledge and make it their own. This process supports the core tenets of Strategy-Based Instruction (SBI), which emphasizes the importance of not just using strategies, but also of being able to reflect on and articulate their use (Anggraeni et al., 2025).

The Role of Digital Infrastructure in Peer Scaffolding

An unexpected but significant finding was the role of digital collaborative tools in facilitating peer scaffolding (Fuster-Barceló et al., 2025; Asfani et al., 2025). Groups that utilized shared documents (e.g., Google Docs) with visible version histories showed 23% higher gains in synthesis scores compared to groups using traditional file-sharing methods. The transparency of contributions and the ability to trace the evolution of ideas appeared to foster greater accountability and more targeted peer feedback. This finding aligns with recent research on computer-supported collaborative learning (CSCL), which emphasizes the role of technology as infrastructure rather than as novelty (Baker & Reimann, 2024).

Implications for Pedagogy in EFL Higher Education

The success of this DBR intervention offers several practical implications for EFL educators seeking to move beyond grammar drills and comprehension questions:

1. Embrace Constructionist Projects: Shift from assigning individual essays to designing collaborative projects that culminate in public, shareable artifacts (Fuster-Barceló et al., 2025). The accountability to peers and the opportunity to learn from their work creates a powerful and authentic motivation for deep learning.

2. Structure for Scaffolding: Do not simply "put students in groups." Design tasks that foster positive/ interdependence (Lopez & Estremera, 2025). Use iterative cycles of production and feedback. The "work-in-progress" presentation model proved highly effective at making the learning process visible and providing multiple opportunities for low-stakes feedback.

3. Leverage the Power of the Peer Model: Explicitly encourage students to observe and learn from each other (Ge et al., 2025; Ouyang et al., 2025). Frame peer presentations as learning resources. Use stimulated recall or reflective prompts to encourage students to identify and articulate what they

have learned from their peers.

4. Use Probing over Telling: The instructor's role should shift from being the "sage on the stage" to the "guide on the side" (Kraatz et al., 2023). Use strategic, open-ended questioning (remedial questioning) to prompt deeper thinking rather than providing direct answers. This empowers students to construct their own understanding.

5. Integrate Digital Collaborative Tools: Leverage platforms that make collaboration transparent and traceable (Fuster-Barceló et al., 2025; Asfani et al., 2025). Tools like Google Docs, Padlet, or specialized CSCL platforms can enhance peer interaction and provide valuable data for formative assessment.

Limitations and Future Research

As a DBR study conducted in a specific context without a control group, this research has certain limitations. The findings should be interpreted as a 'proof of concept' or feasibility demonstration rather than as evidence of comparative efficacy against alternative instructional approaches. The findings are not intended to be generalizable in a statistical sense, but rather to offer a transferable model and a set of "design principles" that can be adapted to other settings (Cobb et al., 2003; Obczovský, 2025). The researcher's dual role as instructor and researcher could have introduced bias, although this was mitigated through peer debriefing and reliance on multiple data sources. Without an independent pre-test administered prior to the intervention, we cannot establish an absolute starting point for student abilities; Week 3 presentations serve as a quasi-baseline. The six-week duration, while sufficient to show within-subjects improvement, does not speak to the long-term retention of these skills. Future research could track students into their second year to assess the durability of the learning.

Interpretation of Large Effect Sizes. A specific limitation concerns the interpretation of the very large effect sizes ($d = 1.76, 1.54, 1.89, 1.96, 2.12$) observed in this study. According to Hattie (2008), the average effect size in educational research is approximately $d = 0.40$, and effects exceeding $d = 1.0$ are rare. Kraft (2020) argues that such large effects in field-based educational research should be interpreted with caution, as they may reflect measurement sensitivity, novelty effects, intensive intervention dosage, or single-instructor consistency rather than purely the intervention's inherent efficacy. The absence of a control group precludes ruling out Hawthorne effects or maturation as contributing factors. Future iterations should include comparison conditions to establish more robust causal claims.

Potential for Confirmation Bias. The results presented here lean toward positive findings, which may reflect a confirmation bias inherent in the research design. Students who struggled with the

intervention or did not respond positively may be underrepresented in the qualitative data, as they were less likely to provide detailed reflections or participate prominently in peer interactions. Future research should explicitly examine boundary conditions and failure modes to understand when and why peer-scaffolded synthesis instruction may be less effective.

Furthermore, while this study grouped students by proficiency, future DBR cycles could explore the dynamics of mixed-proficiency groups to see if the nature of peer scaffolding changes (Kraatz et al., 2023). Another promising avenue would be to more deeply integrate artificial intelligence tools as scaffolds within the peer learning process (Ge et al., 2025; Yang & Chen, 2025). Investigating how different feedback modalities (e.g., written vs. oral, synchronous vs. asynchronous) affect the development of synthesis skills would also be a valuable contribution (Wu & Ko, 2024; Pan et al., 2024).

Conclusion

This study set out to design and investigate an intervention for developing the crucial academic skill of synthesis among first-year EFL students. By adopting a Design-Based Research approach grounded in sociocultural, constructionist, and strategy-based theories, the research moved beyond a simple evaluation of efficacy to illuminate the complex, socially mediated processes through which learning occurs. The findings provide encouraging evidence that when students are engaged in the collaborative construction of public artifacts, a supportive learning ecology can emerge. Within this ecology, peers appear to function as meaningful sources of scaffolding, providing accessible strategic models, conceptual clarification, and linguistic support that may contribute to the development of higher-order thinking (Ouyang et al., 2025; Zhao et al., 2025; Ge et al., 2025).

The study offers a detailed, process-oriented exploration of how students progress from serial summarization to integrated, critical synthesis, supported by statistical measures including large effect sizes ($d > 1.5$) and variance partitioning across individual, group, and tier levels, which should be interpreted with the caution appropriate for a single-group DBR study. It shows that this development is not accidental but is a direct result of an environment that makes thinking visible, values peer interaction as a primary learning resource, and prompts metacognitive reflection (Fuster-Barceló et al., 2025). The conceptual framework of a peer-scaffolded, constructionist project within a collective ZPD offers a promising model with demonstrated potential for educators. It provides a practical alternative to traditional, teacher-centric pedagogies and underscores the principle that to learn a complex skill like synthesis, students must have the opportunity to practice it, debug it, and construct it together. Future research should include control groups and independent pre-tests to establish more definitive causal claims.

For EFL learners in particular, this integrated approach holds the promise of developing not only their academic and cognitive skills but also their confidence and voice in a new academic community. The finding that peer scaffolding may contribute to approximately 36% of learning variance suggests that harnessing peer interaction is not merely a supplementary pedagogical strategy but a potentially valuable component of effective higher education in language learning contexts (Lopez & Estremera, 2025). As collaborative technologies continue to evolve and become more integrated into educational practice, the potential for scaling these peer-scaffolded approaches across diverse contexts and disciplines may hold promise for broader application across EFL and higher education contexts, though such generalizations require further empirical investigation before stronger claims can be made (Baker & Reimann, 2024; Asfani et al., 2025). It is important to note that without a control group, this figure represents an estimate of association rather than a confirmed causal contribution.

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DECLARATION OF GENERATIVE AI AND AI-ASSISTED TECHNOLOGIES IN THE WRITING PROCESS

Generative AI tools were employed exclusively for proofreading. The authors bear full responsibility for all intellectual content, including study design, data collection, analysis, and interpretation of findings.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

The authors declare no competing interests.

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ETHICS STATEMENT

All participants provided informed consent after receiving a detailed explanation of the study's purpose, procedures, risks, benefits, and their right to withdraw at any time without penalty.

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Exploring the use of translanguaging pedagogy to enhance epistemic access for History learners

ABSTRACT

Translanguaging, espoused by Williams and expanded by scholars such as Garcia, Tai, and Wei, has become necessary to enhance history learners' epistemic access. It has been demonstrated how it can be implemented to strengthen epistemic access. However, no systematic literature review has focused on how translanguaging pedagogy can enhance learners' epistemic access. Therefore, this literature review aims to explore how translanguaging pedagogy can enhance learners' epistemic access in History by rigorously looking into existing literature on the topic and providing robust results. The study's findings are divided into three themes that discuss the learners' use of their entire linguistic repertoire, the implementation of semiotic resources and multimodal resources to learn and teach History in a way that gives learners epistemic access, and the sense of equality was recommended. The use of the mentioned translanguaging pedagogy elements had different views; other scholars vouched for it, and others were against it. This paper follows a specific structure; it commences with an introduction, followed by methodology, where the Prisma is outlined. I have indicated that out of 25 articles identified, only 10 were used. The findings were thus presented, analysed, and interpreted, and the conclusion, suggestions, and acknowledgements were followed. The conclusion, suggestions, and statements of open data, ethics, and conflicts of interest were detailed afterwards.

Keywords: *Translanguaging pedagogy, Epistemic access, History, Language.*

Introduction

Epistemic access in the learning and teaching of History for learners has been a challenge in the Senior Phase because of the Language of Learning and Teaching – English (LoLT – English) serving as a barrier to learners' comprehension, meaning creation, knowledge construction and active participation and contribution of knowledge in history learning and teaching. In this study, translanguaging

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pedagogy is a relevant tool for mitigating the challenges vis-à-vis learners' epistemic access in History. Treffers-Daller (2025) indicates that translanguaging pedagogy was developed by Williams in Wales back in 1994 during his research at a school. He found that the teacher and learners used their home language - Welsh, and the target language - English, from time to time during their lesson, which led him to coin the term *trawsieithu* (Treffers-Daller, 2025).

Scholars like Garcia, Xing, Ping, Qing, Tai, Wei, and others have expanded extensively on translanguaging as a theory and a pedagogical method. Garcia (2024) emphasises dismantling the idea of having the first and second languages, asserting that languages are not different and each does not necessarily need to be individually used in particular spaces and others. She advocates for naturally allowing the flow of accessing and using the entire linguistic repertoire to communicate, and she coined translanguaging (Garcia, 2025). Makalela (2022) calls it Horizontal Multilingualism, where individuals naturally communicate fluidly, moving between various languages to create meaning, enhance comprehension and construct knowledge. Tai (2025) and Xin et al. (2024) joined in emphasising that translanguaging is not limited to the use of named languages, but goes as far as including non-verbal resources such as semiotic and multimodal resources to create meaning, enhance understanding, construct knowledge and communication. Ndhlovu and Makalela (2021) and Wei and Garcia (2022) argue that translanguaging's effective implementation will disassemble the hierarchy in language, conscientising learners of their identities amid their diversity.

Despite the challenge that has been identified by scholars such as Labenko and Shabunina (2024) that learners whose home language is not English find it challenging to learn History effectively, perform well in it, comprehend content, create meaning, construct knowledge and articulate themselves proficiently because they have to do all that in English (Mcwango & Makhathini, 2021); very few research has been conducted on how translanguaging pedagogy can be implemented to enhance learners epistemic access in History. Tai (2024) is one of the scholars who directly inferred in one of his studies that translanguaging pedagogy through using the entire linguistic repertoire, semiotic resources such as videos and pictures and multimodal resources such as gestures can be used to enhance history learners' epistemic access. However, no peer-reviewed systematic literature review has looked at how translanguaging pedagogy can improve learners' epistemic access in History while conducting this study, which makes this study unique. Within this mind, this study aims to explore how translanguaging pedagogy can enhance learners' epistemic access in History.

Methods

This paper presents a systematic literature review on how teachers can implement translanguaging pedagogy to enhance history learners' epistemic access. A systematic literature review follows a very systematic process, whereby the current literature is assembled, arranged and assessed in-depth to provide results that are more lucid, comprehensive and unbiased (Paul et al., 2023). Karunarathna et al. (2024) add that the type of systematic literature review used for this study is a domain-based conceptual systematic literature review, which will focus on a particular topic to steer the review. Equally important, Bandara and Syed (2024) indicate that a domain-based conceptual systematic literature review makes exhaustive research on a subject, engaging analytically with numerous literatures through following a strong structure that will guide it in extracting data, accentuating gaps and providing advice for future research. Therefore, the main question this systematic literature review seeks to answer is "how can translanguaging pedagogy be used to enhance history learners' epistemic access?" It will be followed by sub-questions (SQ) listed below:

SQ 1: How is translanguaging pedagogy used to enhance learners' epistemic access in History?

SQ 2: What are the challenges of implementing translanguaging pedagogy?

SQ 3: What are the pros and cons of translanguaging pedagogy?

Therefore, this systematic literature review is structured by presenting the methodology, which entails planning, research method, findings, discussions, and conclusion.

Planning the review

Before conducting the review, I identified the relevant and appropriate articles to answer my research questions. Secondly, I assessed which are the most relevant to answer the research questions and thus analysed the relevant articles to infer the answers to the research questions. The following string was used to search for relevant sources:

(translanguaging AND History teaching; history teaching AND language; history education AND English; teaching History in English)

After using the above strings to search, I figured they were all relevant in giving me the sources that I needed. All relevant electronic articles were identified; the leading databases and e-journals shown hereunder helped provide relevant articles.

- JSTOR journals
- Scopus
- Taylor & Francis
- Research Gate

From these databases, the articles that are relevant and used are the ones that include:

Timeline 2020 – 2025 (5 years)

- Discussing the influence of translanguaging in the learning and teaching of school subjects
- How teachers and learners use translanguaging to teach history learning and teaching
- And talks about how translanguaging enhances learners' epistemic access, especially in history education.

The articles that will **be excluded from** the selection are the ones that:

- Do not talk about History,
- Do not talk about the influence of the English language on History.
- Do not talk about translanguaging.
- Do not talk about History learning and teaching at the school level.

Equally important, this systematic literature review will use only peer-reviewed articles published between 2015 and 2025. Only articles written in English, Southern/Northern Sotho, Tswana and Xhosa will be used in this literature because those are the only languages the researcher understands.

Therefore, to avoid bias, I will present the articles I have selected to my supervisor to determine whether they are appropriate for this systematic literature review; he will assess me regularly to ascertain that I am fair and neutral in my study.

Research Method

This systematic literature review will look into the perspective of teaching on translanguaging pedagogy.

Only peer-reviewed articles and conference articles will be used to further this literature. Only sources within the past 10 years will be employed in this study to ascertain the credibility and relevancy of this systematic literature review.

This literature seeks to identify, assess and analyse the academic literature on the practice of translanguaging in history education through:

- Divulging a critical view of translanguaging in the history education status quo,
- Giving perspectives from empirical studies conducted vis-à-vis translanguaging pedagogy in history education.
- Serve as a conduit to the perspective that should be taken for further research vis-à-vis translanguaging pedagogy.

Varsha et al. (2024) advised that a systematic literature review was conducted by selecting and utilising relevant academic articles and conference articles, following a structured method to conduct the research as demonstrated below.

Conducting the review

I started searching for publications in February 2025, using strings like the ones I mentioned above. I found that strings about English Medium instruction provided the results I sought. What is more, I used four databases to get the publications.

Through searching, I identified 22 publications which were journal articles. From the accumulated 22, two articles were duplicates and removed, leaving me with 20 articles. Further, five articles with titles, abstracts and texts irrelevant to my study were excluded, leaving me with 15 articles.

With the 15 articles remaining, I read them in-depth, seeking to extract relevant information. Thus, I excluded five with no direct information I needed to steer my study and found the remaining 10 beneficial information. I only sought to utilise sources that spoke about translanguaging in teaching content other than languages, especially History, not translanguaging in teaching language subjects.

The flow diagram (Prisma Chart) in **Figure 1** depicts how this process unfolded. **Table 1**, on the other hand, presents the articles that are used to steer this systematic literature review.

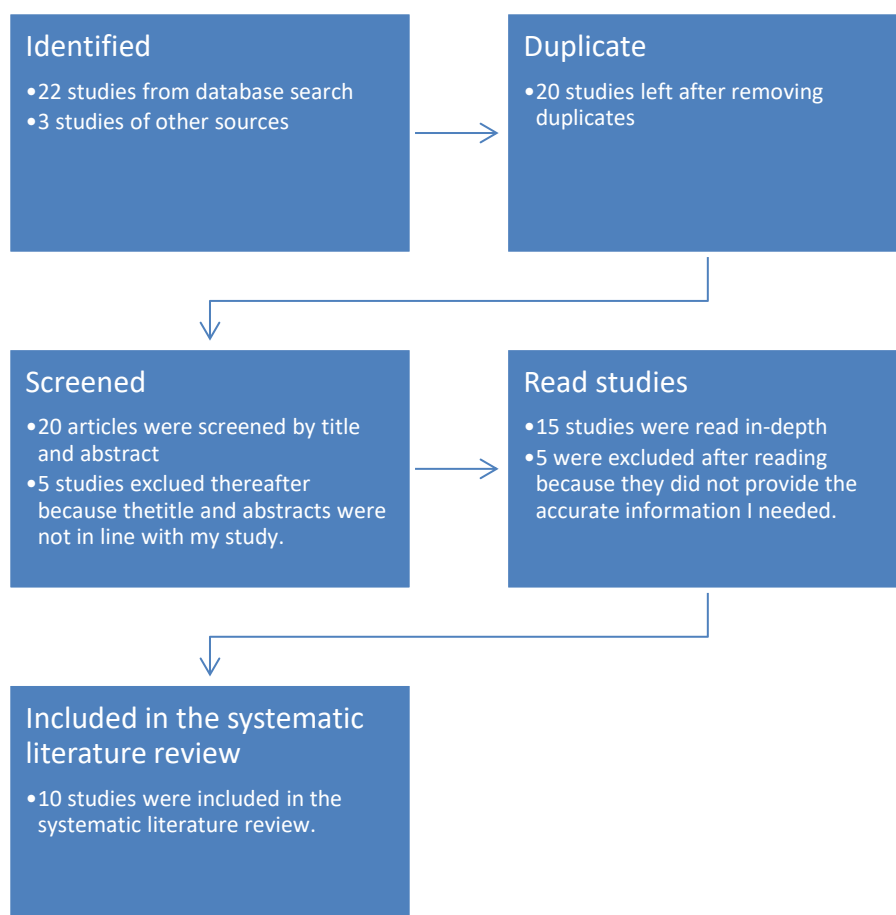


Figure 1. Prisma Chart.

Results and Discussion

Overall review of selected studies

I have come to steer this literature review with 10 articles that I found most suitable. The graph indicates a decline in translanguaging pedagogy research from 2021, while it had reached its peak from a steady but gradual increase in 2020, as depicted by the blue bars. Various factors like COVID-19 could have influenced that. The red line indicated the constant increase in the need for translanguaging pedagogy, despite the fluctuation of its publications.

Figure 2, on the other hand, shows that different parts of the world have the implementation of translanguaging pedagogy in common. The figure does not show the countries that publish the most about translanguaging, but it shows the countries from which the publications I used are from. However, it is noteworthy for me to underscore that having three from South Africa is significant as this study will attempt to contribute to the implementation of translanguaging in South Africa's schools, as mother tongue as the language for learning and teaching is being ushered in in schools (Singh, 2024). Implementing translanguaging pedagogy is essential in most parts of the world, as no country speaks only one language (Brown & Kim, 2025).

Sample groups of participants

All the articles used to steer this systematic literature review are by scholars with good credentials, ranging from honours to master's. 60% are university lecturers, 20% are college teachers, and the other 20% are university students. The calculations include both authors and co-authors. The results may be conducive for implementation as the studies used are both empirical and desktop.

Therefore, as depicted in **Figure 4**, 8 out of 10 report the good aspects of translanguaging pedagogy while only two report otherwise. This could mean that translanguaging benefits many, as discussed in the discussion section. Furthermore, succinct details of the analysed articles have been given in **Table 1**. Some technological resources were used to identify articles necessary to steer this review.

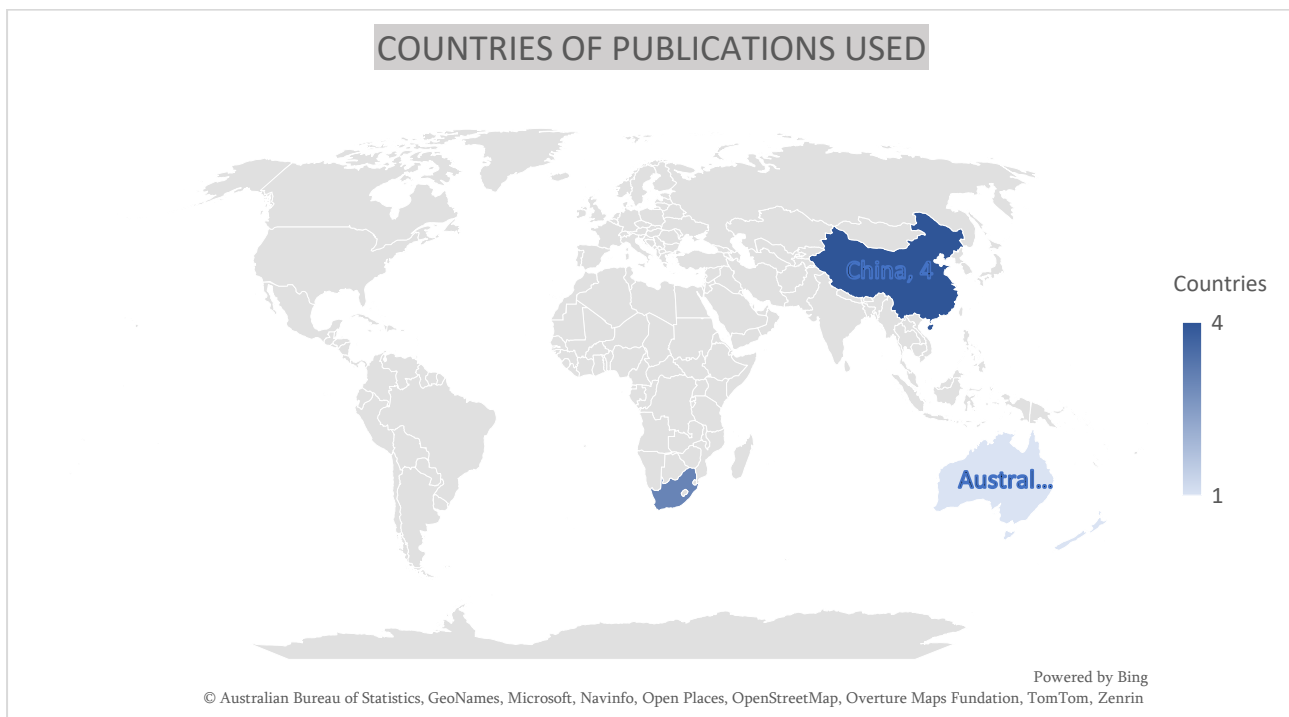


Figure 2. Number of articles used per selected countries

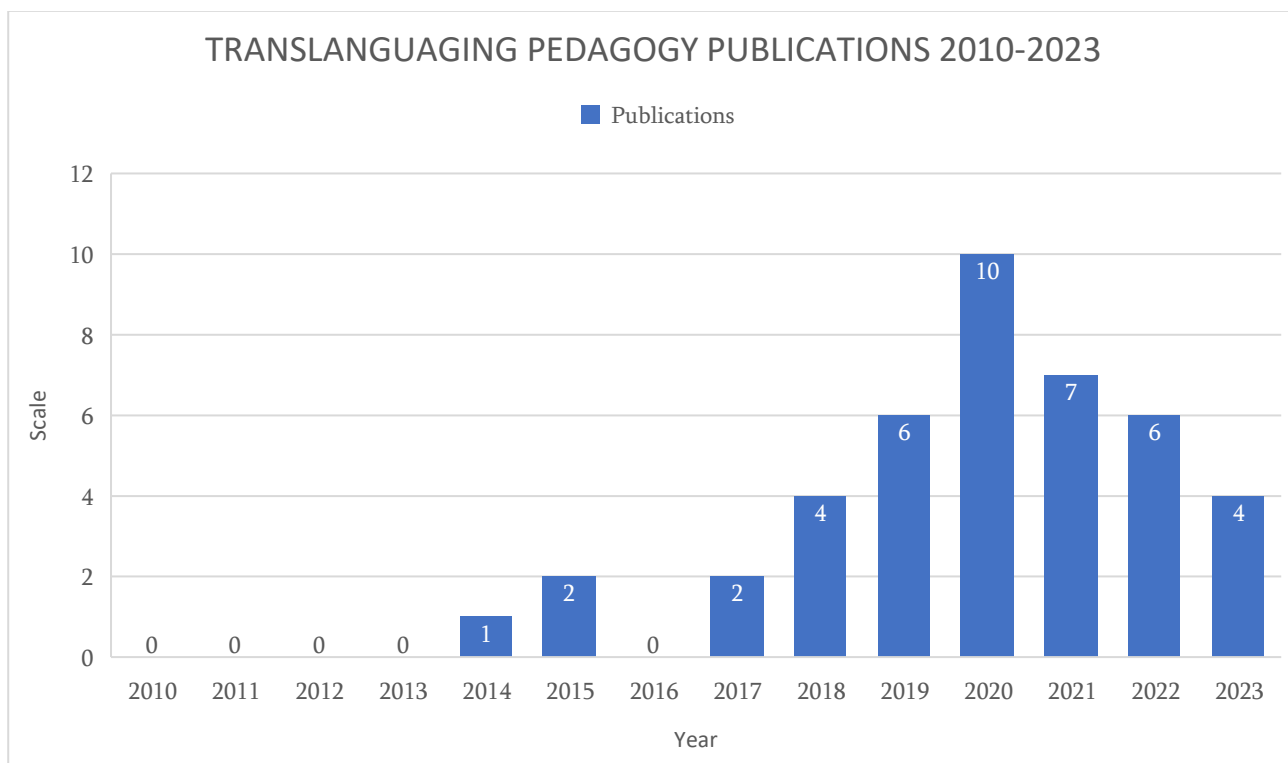


Figure 3. Translanguaging pedagogy publications.

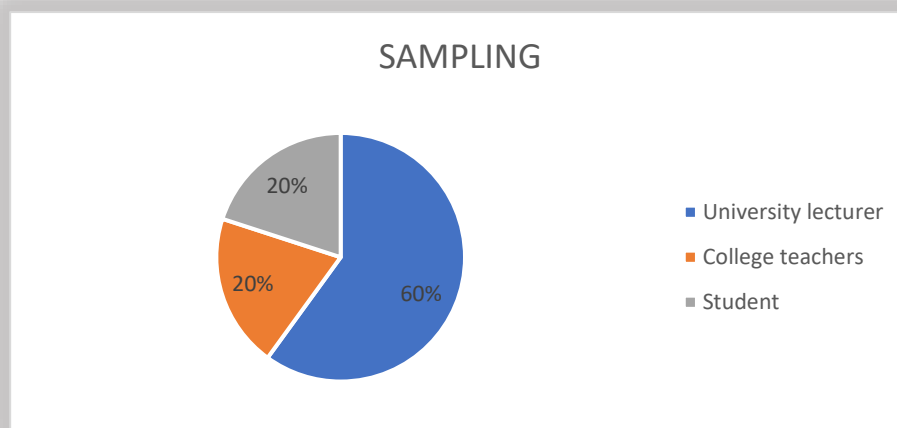


Figure 4. Percentage of participants based on occupation

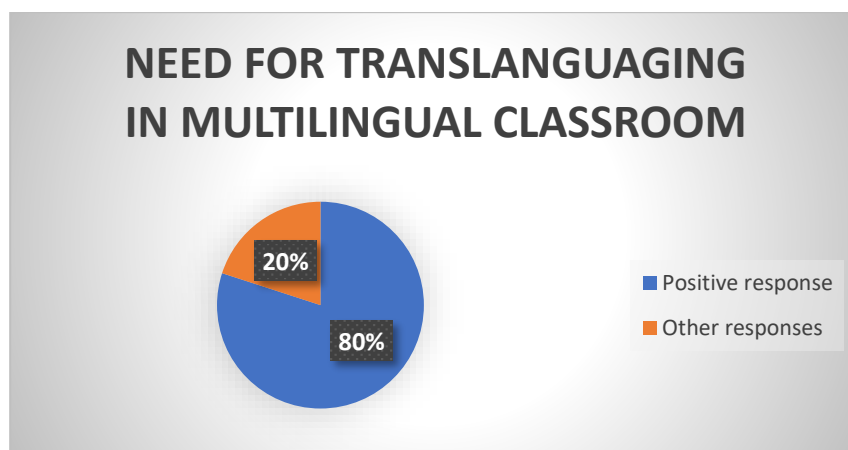


Figure 5. Need for translanguaging in multilingual classrooms

Table 1. Details of the articles used.

Author(s)	Title	Study design	Participants	Intervention	Outcome measures
Tai et al. (2025)	Enhancing students' content and language development: Implications for researching multilingualism in CLIL classroom context.	Literature review.	Sixty-two publications were used, with 50 different scholars.	Linguistic repertoire, multimodal resources and technological resources.	Literature Review
Chang (2024)	Developing preservice bilingual teachers' transformative agency.	Qualitative Research Design	11 English as a Foreign Language student teachers.	Pictures and body language.	Interview, document analysis and observations.
Lu & So (2023)	Translanguaging in scientific practices: a study of high school teachers in English Medium Instruction	Enquiry-based science teaching	Four secondary-school-level science teachers.	Moving fluidly between different languages.	Interviews and observations.

	inquiry-based science classrooms.				
Abdulatief & Guzula (2024)	Crossing the frontier from oral to written translanguaging for epistemic access in natural science.	Ethnographic	One Senior Phase (Grade 7-9) Natural Science teacher.	Moving from oral translanguaging to written translanguaging.	Interviews and observations.
Tai (2025)	Translanguaging in Multilingual Education.	Literature review	37 published papers were used, with 26 different scholars.	Fun talk learning, integrating everyday knowledge with content knowledge, and using technology in class.	Literature Review
Heugh (2015)	Epistemologies in multilingual education: Translanguaging and genre-companions in conversation with policy and practice.	Literature review	22 Published papers whose authors recognise mismatches between what seem to be policies and practices borrowed from the north and realities of the contemporary south.	The use of the entire communicative repertoire.	Literature review
Makalela (2016)	Ubuntu translanguaging: An alternative framework for complex multilingual encounters.	Sequential, linear and positivism	Learners.	Ubuntu translanguaging.	Observations and interviews.
Mabule (2015)	What is this? Is it code switching, code mixing, or language altering?	Observations	20 participants from Limpopo	Using different languages spontaneously.	Observations
Seals et al. (2019)	The use of translanguaging to bridge sociocultural knowledge in a puna reo.	Kaupapa Maori and school-based ethnography	Teachers, learners and parents from a puna reo.	Naturally, using different languages.	Interviews and observations.
Pakeerathy & Karunakaran (2023)	Epistemologies in multilingual education: Translanguaging and genre-companions in conversation with policy and practice.	Mixed Method and Experimental Analysis	4 participants. One teacher and three learners.	Learners use language of their choice to communicate, use visuals, and demonstrate the knowledge acquired kinetically.	Interviews, observations and document analysis.

Ten published articles about translanguaging pedagogy were used to conduct this study, as shown in **Table 1**. Three were literature review articles, while seven were empirical studies. Various data collection methods, such as interviews, observations and document analysis, were used to conduct the empirical studies. At the same time, various literature on translanguaging pedagogy were also used to

conduct literature review studies. The results divulge that fluidly moving between different languages when communicating, using semiotic resources such as visuals and audios, and multimodal resources such as gestures are effective strategies for epistemic access.

Table 2. Objectives derived from the literature used for the study.

Authors	Objective 1: To explore how translanguaging pedagogy enhances history learners' epistemic access.	Objective 2: To determine the challenges of implementing translanguaging pedagogy.	Objective 3: To examine the pros and cons of translanguaging pedagogy.
Tai et al. (2025)	Teachers are encouraged to enable learners to use their entire linguistic repertoire, multimodal resources, and technological resources to enhance their epistemic access to History.	The language barrier makes it challenging for learners to learn History in English.	Translanguaging pedagogy has limitations, such as fostering social injustice and language hierarchy.
Chang (2024)	History teachers use pictures and body language to create meaning and understanding (epistemic access).	Incompetency of history teachers and learners in English, translating from English to Taiwanese and vice versa, hampers epistemic access for history learners.	
Lu & So (2023)	Moving between learners' home language and English and using visuals during lesson presentations helps history learners understand the lesson. When history learners can articulate themselves in any language of their choice, they become active participants in creating meaning.		
Abdulatif & Guzula (2024)	Moving from oral translanguaging to written translanguaging. Teachers' translanguaging on the board and encouraging learners to use their entire linguistic repertoire to jot down notes enhance history learners' comprehension and participation in knowledge construction. History learners can present or act out the knowledge they have acquired through visuals.	It has been figured that teachers creating new words for content concepts such as mathematics, science, and History may be challenging and misleading, as the mother tongue-generated terms might not convey the same message.	
Tai (2025)	History learners' meaning creation, knowledge construction and comprehension are enhanced through engaging in fun talk learning, integrating everyday knowledge with content		

	knowledge and using technology in class.		
Heugh (2015)	Translanguaging encourages history learners to use their entire communicative repertoire to enhance comprehension, meaning creation and knowledge construction.	Translanguaging pedagogy may be foreign and irrelevant to South Africa.	Fluidly using different languages to communicate is a standard practice in South Africa.
Makalela (2016)	Ubuntu translanguaging pedagogy makes communication, comprehension, meaning creation and knowledge construction easy.		Translanguaging is a natural process in South Africa. It also places value on the identity of history learners, enriching is one of the aims of History teaching in South Africa.
Mabule (2015)		.	Using more than one language to communicate spontaneously in South Africa. This method of communication is used for various reasons, like elaborating, emphasising and making other groups of people understand what is being communicated. It can effectively be used in history education for elaboration, emphasis and comprehension enhancement.
Seals et al. (2019)			People use translanguaging to exclude others who may not understand the home languages of others. Fluidly moving between various languages when communicating is normal in New Zealand. This may give history learners not proficient in either language the confidence to participate actively in meaning creation, knowledge construction, and comprehend lessons.
Pakeerathy & Karunakaran (2023)	Translanguaging in this regard – allowing history learners to use the language of their choice to communicate, using objects such as visuals or acting out their knowledge to demonstrate their knowledge acquisition has rendered positive results.	Some non-native English-speaking history learners may find it challenging to participate orally and in written form in classrooms and comprehend lessons presented in English. Translanguaging should not go as far as allowing learners to write assessments in any language or communicative form of their choice.	

Table 2 shows three objectives that drive this study, and each published article contributes to one or some of the objectives. The findings demonstrated here are narrowed to how translanguaging pedagogy influences learners' epistemic access in History. Out of 10 articles, eight address the first objective; five address the second, and five address the third.

Main findings

The main findings of this research are exploring ways in which learners' epistemic access can be enhanced through translanguaging pedagogy. Translanguaging pedagogy has been a burning issue for many decades, although I will focus on the last five years' research. In the diverse societies we live in, where there are dozens of languages spoken and the language of learning and teaching has been limited to only one dominant language – mostly English – translanguaging pedagogy has come in handy in facilitating effective communication, comprehension, meaning creation and knowledge construction. Hereunder, we will look at the viewpoint of different scholars on translanguaging pedagogy to teach content – History. Only a few scholars focus on teaching History through translanguaging pedagogy.

How translanguaging pedagogy is used to enhance History learners' epistemic access

According to Tai (2024b), when History is taught in a way that allow various named languages to be used, learners may find it easy to understand and critically engage with the content to construct knowledge (Tai, 2024b). This will give history learners' the freedom of using their languages to help each other make sense of the content they are learning, engage with the content and in discussions that will help them create meaning and construct knowledge. Additionally, Abdulatief and Guzula (2024) concert trans-register, i.e., explaining concepts in an academic language using the everyday English language, can also be used as a method that helps learners with comprehension, meaning creation and knowledge construction.

Similarly, Lu and So (2023) articulate that when teachers translate new content concepts, such as historical concepts, to learners' home languages, explaining them as transcending between English and their home language, learners get to understand the content and engage with it. For example, when the concept of consciousness is explained in English as "... the awakening of blacks ... recognising one's inherent dignity and taking pride in it," in the textbook, the teacher naturally explains using the mother tongue that it means "*Ho tsoha! Ho lemoha seriti sa tlhaho sa motho le ho ba motlotlo ka sona / Ho ba aware ka dignity ya tlhaho ya motho ebile o ba proud ka yona.*" Sotho native learners will understand it in-depth as words like "*seriti sa tlhaho*" have a profound meaning that hits home personally to native Sotho. As the late president Nelson Mandela said, "If you talk to a man in a language he understands, it goes to his head. If you talk to him in his language, that goes to his heart."

Heugh (2015) supports that translanguaging may help learners with comprehension by encouraging them to utilise their entire linguistic repertoire to communicate in the classes, which I find relevant to the history classroom. Similar to what Tai (2025) said, Heugh (2015) aver that translanguaging encourages the use of learners' everyday language in the academic space, whereby the learner will fluidly move among various languages like their home language and the academic language. This may benefit history learners greatly in understanding historical concepts and content, which is in accord with what Pakeerathy and Karunakaran (2023) aver that translanguaging pedagogy advocates for the use of home languages and vernaculars to help learners comprehend the content and become active participants in meaning creation and knowledge construction.

Likewise, Makalela (2022) elucidate that translanguaging pedagogy encourages learners to utilise their entire linguistic repertoire unlimitedly; whereby they engage in a communication where different languages are used – the learner may receive information through listening or reading in a particular language and respond verbally or in writing in another language. Seals et al. (2019) concord with Makalela (2022), supporting the scholars as mentioned earlier, stating that integrating English with home-languages and other preferred languages to communicate helps learners still learning the foreign language comprehend the lesson and create meaning. In Mabule's (2015) article, we see participants using three languages in one sentence to communicate, and the purpose for that was to ascertain comprehension through emphasis. This may be part of accessing the linguistic repertoire in the translanguaging definition, enhancing learners' understanding, meaning creation and knowledge construction.

Consequently, Abdulatief and Guzula (2024) advocate for implementing and incorporating learners' mother tongue dictionaries to help enhance learners' comprehension. Abdulatief and Guzula (2024) argue that it is pivotal for epistemic enhancement to include learners' indigenous language and encourage learners to do their multilingual glossary, where they would use their entire linguistic repertoire to explain what academic concepts mean. Absolute translation and transliteration are advised as they help learners easily comprehend the concepts spoken and their definitions.

Chang (2020) divulges that some teachers are not competent and proficient in English, thus introduces semiotic and multimodal resources in this section. He indicates that using flash cards with pictures of what the teachers are referring to when teaching and demonstrating body language helps learners comprehend what the teachers imply (Chang, 2020). Pakeerathy and Karunakaran (2023) elaborate that textbooks, videos, and practical work help learners understand the content and contribute to meaning creation and knowledge construction.

Tai et al. (2025) congruently add to non-linguistic communications, divulging that technology

enables the implementation of translanguaging pedagogy as well, as it can serve as a multimodal resource to enhance learners' meaning creation, comprehension and participation in the history classroom. iPads have been found to increase learner participation, content and language learning (Tai et al., 2025). Likewise, virtual reality has allowed learners to visually, kinetically and tactically learn, create meaning, gain comprehension and practice what they have learned without being limited by a named language (Tai et al., 2025). Tai (2025) adds that applying technology in the classroom enables the teacher to use semiotic resources such as pictures, videos, and audio.

Moreover, Luh and So (2024) indicate that using multimodal resources such as gestures and writing on the board enhances learners' meaning creation, knowledge construction, comprehension and active participation. Abdulatief and Guzula (2024) further reveal bridging from oral translanguaging to written translanguaging, whereby teachers are encouraged to demonstrate translanguaging on the board, writing academic language in English and having its translations in the home language of learners, which is IsiXhosa in this case. Learners are also encouraged to write notes using their entire linguistic repertoire (Abdulatief & Guzula, 2024). Abdulatief and Guzula (2024) further encourage teachers to use posters to present their work because it helps learners understand the content and its concepts, create meaning, construct knowledge and participate actively in class. Further, Tai et al. (2025) argue that assessments are often done in one language – English, which results in poor performance of learners who are not proficient in English. He indicates that the challenge may also be beyond named languages. Therefore, it should be considered for learners to be given the liberty of answering assessments in a multimodal manner, through semiotic resources, including technological resources. They believe that allowing learners to articulate themselves as they see fit would enable them to demonstrate real content knowledge acquired during learning and teaching.

The challenges of implementing translanguaging pedagogy

Chang (2024) indicates that it is challenging for non-native English learners and teachers to comprehend, create meaning and express themselves in English. The first challenge he identified was the challenge teachers themselves had of accurately translating from Taiwanese to English, which may hinder learning should the teacher not have the ability to use the learners' home language to explain concepts such as "consciousness". Direct translation from Taiwanese to English may alter the original meaning of what was said. Emphatically, Chang (2024) states that teachers may have challenges presenting lessons in a way that learners can easily understand. Abdulatief and Guzula (2024) concur with Chang (2024) and Tai et al (2025) through underscoring that it is a challenge for learners to learn content using English. It has been figured that teachers creating new words for content concepts such as mathematics, science, and History may be challenging and misleading, as the mother tongue-

generated terms might not convey the same message.

Further, Heugh (2024) aver that as much as translanguaging pedagogy may have the potential of enhancing learners' comprehension, meaning creation and knowledge construction, it could be referred to as a northern method of countering linguistic barriers in learning and teaching, and not be of much relevance in most of the South African context. Heugh (2024) raises this because translanguaging pedagogy is already a natural communication process in South Africa; however, implementing it in a class with learners with many different home languages can be challenging. This is where Tai et al.'s (2025) assertion come in, that translanguaging pedagogy has limitations, which are fostering social injustice and language hierarchy, whereby the most common language in the society is the one spoken in class to cater for translanguaging and the other home languages that are a minority in class are not used. Mabule (2015) notes that different people use translanguaging to exclude others who may not understand the home languages of others. It is essential to highlight that translanguaging should be inclusive.

Pakeerathy and Karunakaran (2023) argue that translanguaging should not go as far as allowing learners to write assessments in any language or any communicative form of their choice. This statement seems to limit the lengths to which translanguaging can go. The lengths may differ from country to country.

The pros and cons of translanguaging pedagogy

According to Tai et al. (2025), translanguaging pedagogy breaks the barrier between different languages, showing that no language is efficient on its own. Still, all languages may become more effective in building comprehension, meaning creation and knowledge construction when fused with other languages and forms of communication. Tai et al. (2025) emphasise that translanguaging pedagogy seeks to dismantle the language hierarchy. Lu and So (2023) concur with Tai et al. that arguing that when learners are given the liberty to engage with learning in their home language, the tension created by language barriers that exist between the learners and the teachers – not understanding each other, not following instructions, etc. – gets to be eased.

In the same vein, Heugh (2015), Mabule (2016) and Makalela (2016) indicate that translanguaging is embedded in the way language is naturally used in Africa, even before colonial rule. Similarly, Seals et al. (2019) maintain that fluid communication between various languages is a natural process in New Zealand. This is evidence that translanguaging is subconsciously practised in some, if not most, parts of the world. Mabule (2015) indicates that code-switching, code-mixing and code-alternation – which I will use interchangeably with translanguaging in this context because of the explanations given by

Mabule (2015) – spontaneously happenS in other parts of the world because it is used daily to ascertain comprehension in conversations, elaborate emphatically on what is being communicated. It is also used because certain words and phrases may not have direct translations of what they mean in other languages. For example, some Sotho words may not have a direct translation into English and vice versa.

Tai et al. (2025) reiterate that educators should know the type of learners they have – their home languages and cultures- to understand how to address the language barrier they may have in the classroom. The teachers should be aware that implementing translanguaging pedagogy can potentially accommodate learners in their diversity; it enhances learners' confidence to participate in class, meaning creation and comprehension of the content (Tai et al., 2025). Makalela (2016) also divulges that translanguaging, which occurs in the African context, is the Ubuntu Translanguaging, conscientising learners of their African identity, gives value to their identity and emphasises respect for diversity in languages, and that languages are equally important and need each other to enhance understanding, create meaning and construct knowledge (Makalela, 2016).

Mabule (2015) also alludes that code-switching, code-mixing and code-alternation affirm the speaker's identity and create a sense of belonging. Seals et al. (2019) found that learners get a sense of belonging and inclusion when using their entire linguistic repertoire to express themselves. Seals et al. (2019) assert that translanguaging pedagogy gives learners who are not competent in either language the confidence to actively participate in class because all languages are allowed to be used. The learner can identify with their language. Seal et al.'s (2019) statement upholds the aim of history education stipulated in the CAPS document: to instil national pride that will help learners identify with their personal, family and local History (CAPS, 2011).

Discussion, Analysis and Interpretation

English as the language of learning, teaching and assessment has been a challenge in most schools in South Africa, it has also been a challenge in China and some other parts of the world. The English history learners may use outside the classroom, which is different from the historical academic English, making history learners find it challenging to comprehend. Some history teachers may also lack the English competency and proficiency, which will also serve as an impediment to facilitating learners' comprehension of History, meaning creation and knowledge construction. This is why translanguaging pedagogy has been advised.

Regarding utilising the entire linguistic repertoire, I will concentrate on how it may help enhance History learners' epistemic access. Given the above-mentioned sources, history learners may improve their comprehension, ability to create meaning, and knowledge by employing the whole linguistic

repertoire. For example, allowing history learners to use their preferred languages, such as their home languages, to acquire knowledge and disseminate it, introducing a dictionary of indigenous languages, and transliterating and translating historical concepts help learners enhance their epistemic access. When learners do oral research, they often acquire knowledge in their preferred languages, which allows a lot of comprehension, and academic concept words are transliterated if they do not have exact translations. Therefore, this versatility encourages the learners to engage with the content to create meaning and construct knowledge with minimal challenges posed by language.

Moreover, the relevance of the use of gestures in the history class can be demonstrated when teaching topics like the scramble for Africa, where learners and the teacher can role play the event by dividing learners in 8 groups and making them choose among the seven countries the ones they prefer, and the last group will represent Africa. After that, you set them up in a summit of 7 European countries, prepared to talk about sharing Africa amongst themselves in the absence of Africa in the summit. Kinaesthetic learners and possibly most, if not all, learners would benefit from this experience (Burhanuddin & Sritharen, 2024; Tai, 2024a). Documenting students' conceptual understanding of second language vocabulary knowledge: a translanguaging analysis of classroom interactions in a primary English as a second language classroom for linguistically and culturally diverse students (Tai, 2024b). Writing on the board also helps learners learn how to write words; using various languages on the board to accommodate learners may also be effective for comprehension. Additionally, there are different historical games such as *Africa Empire* and *Ms. Information - The Constitution* that learners could play on their devices, which will educate them on the events that took place in the past and engage with those events head-on through games. Playing *Africa Empire*, which iGindisGames created on virtual reality games, will be more interesting as learners will feel like they are in the events (Pérez Fernández, 2024).

Additionally, history education also values the identity of all humankind, as it is through History that human rights were established, and people can establish their identity from History. What makes an individual a proud native is the historical journey of his people. When learners recognise that their History, language and identity are valued in the history classroom, it will give them confidence and encourage them to partake in history learning and teaching by contributing everyday knowledge and indigenous knowledge in the lesson. The teachers may also localise or make History more relevant to learners so that they can easily comprehend it, create meaning, and construct knowledge.

Furthermore, as much as translanguaging has proven beneficial, it also has cons. In a history classroom with learners of many different languages, teachers may find it challenging to implement effectively because if they use one language, the learners who speak other languages will be disadvantaged. As mentioned above, scholars differ in their perspectives on using learners' preferred languages, semiotic resources and multimodal resources in assessments. As much as the majority

advocate for it, averring that it will improve learners' performance as it helps them demonstrate their actual acquired knowledge, few argue that it should not go as far as allowing learners to implement translanguaging in that manner for assessments. For those who disagree with assessments being conducted semiotically and multimodally, allowing the use of the entire linguistic repertoire seems exclusive, excluding those learners who can only use those methods to respond to assessments. Using scribes to help such learners also seems to undermine and disregard how other learners can effectively articulate themselves.

Conclusion

Tai et al. (2025) reveal that implementing translanguaging pedagogy is beneficial to learning and teaching History, but also has limitations. It benefits history learners by allowing them to employ their entire communicative repertoire – their linguistic repertoire, semiotic resources, and multimodal resources – to construct meaning and understanding in History. Therefore, teachers should employ various translanguaging strategies such as translation, multimodal, semiotic and technological resources to make the benefits effective (Tai et al., 2025). Equally important, Tai (2025) divulges that translanguaging pedagogy may help history learners in meaning creation, knowledge construction and comprehension. It ought to encourage fun talk in learning, whereby learners and teachers will engage in historical conversation in a friendly manner, even controversial topics; it also ought to integrate learners' everyday knowledge and background knowledge with the new content knowledge, to make new content knowledge to relate learners' and bring equality in meaning creation and knowledge construction between the learners' and the teachers. The teacher could hold conversations about the History of the learner's hometown. In conjunction, Heugh (2024) emphasises that translanguaging encourages using all communicative methods to create meaning and construct knowledge and comprehension. Heugh (2016), Mabule (2015), Makalela (2016), and Seals et al. (2019) (although from a different context – New Zealand) reiterate that the use of more than one language to communicate in South Africa and New Zealand is a regular activity that transpires almost daily, so it would not be very challenging to infuse it in the history classroom. However, Seals et al. (2019) only focus on the linguistic advantage of translanguaging; they do not expand to its semiotic and multimodal advantages. Therefore, translanguaging pedagogy is essential in facilitating smooth learning and teaching in History. With all that being recognised, it is equally critical for future research to expand on how History can be taught and used in assessments such as examinations and formal projects using translanguaging pedagogy to enhance learners' epistemic access.

STATEMENTS OF OPEN DATA, ETHICS AND CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The articles used in the systematic literature review were extracted from journals and are open access.

No ethical clearance was needed to conduct this study. Only articles were used; no human participants participated in the study.

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The first author constructed this systematic literature review, while the second and third author read and approved the final version of this systematic literature review for publication. This article forms part of the first authors' thesis.

DECLARATION OF INTEREST

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article. The authors confirmed that the paper was free of plagiarism.

DATA AVAILABILITY

Since this study is a systematic literature review, the data used is available on public domain and can be retrieved from the following the reference directives.

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Challenges and Practices in Teaching and Learning of English as a Foreign Language: Two Selected High Schools in Kafa Zone Bonga Town, Ethiopia

ABSTRACT

This research investigated the challenges and practices related to teaching and learning English as a foreign language (EFL) in Kafa Zone, Bonga town, Ethiopia. The study involved 120 students from two randomly selected high schools (60 from each), employing a mixed-methods approach. Data were collected through students' questionnaire, teachers' interview, and classroom observations. The findings revealed major barriers, which including a main dependence on the mother tongue in the classroom, insufficient exposure to English practice, and limited students' engagement in speaking activities. The data from questionnaire highlighted issues, such as ineffective teaching methods and a lack of motivation among students. Moreover, teachers' dependence on translation and lecture-based instruction limited active learning approach in the EFL classroom. The implications recommend that the need for enhanced teacher training, improved instructional strategies, and a more supportive learning setting to enhance English language skills. Finally, the investigation underlines the need for systematic changes in English language education to better equip students for effective communication in a globalization context

Keywords: *English proficiency, mother tongue interference, student motivation, teaching methods, instructional challenges.*

Introduction

Nowadays, the English language is an important language for communication in the 21st century in language teaching classrooms. Its significance is particularly pronounced in developing countries such as Ethiopia, which seek to establish diplomatic, economic, educational, and cultural relationships with more developed nations. Concerning this, Crystal (2009) explains that English serves as an international lingua franca, particularly in fields such as politics, commerce, industry, and education. In light of this, many people around the globe are motivated to improve their English language skills. Mandefro et al. (2016) suggest that the teaching and learning of the English language are closely associated with global social and political developments.

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In the Ethiopian context, the teaching and learning of English as a foreign language began relatively recently compared to a few other African countries. Its introduction was closely connected to the beginning of modern education during the reign of Emperor Menelik II.

Gerencheal and Mishra (2019) explain that English has been used as a medium of instruction since the early 20th century, when Ethiopia began establishing formal education systems to foster international engagement. According to Fasika (2014), modern education in Ethiopia officially began in 1908, and foreign languages such as English, Italian, and French were introduced as part of that development.

English is currently taught as a second or foreign language in Ethiopia from primary school through higher education. The Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia prioritizes equitable, relevant, and quality education and has allocated considerable resources toward achieving this goal (MoE, 2009). According to the 1994 Education and Training Policy, English is introduced as a subject beginning in Grade 1 and becomes the medium of instruction from Grade 5 onward, continuing through secondary and tertiary education (Gerencheal & Mishra, 2019). Although mother-tongue instruction is encouraged during the early primary grades, English remains central to students' academic advancement at higher levels of education.

Despite these policy efforts, many Ethiopian students struggle to develop adequate English language proficiency. English is often perceived as a difficult subject, which in turn affects students' motivation and engagement. This perception negatively influences their academic performance and limits their ability to communicate effectively in English both inside and outside the classroom. These challenges have raised concerns among educators, school leaders, and policymakers.

Educational institutions play a key role in preparing learners to address the social, economic, and cultural challenges of the 21st century. In many African countries, English functions as the primary language of instruction and a medium of international communication. Eshetie (2010) highlights the significant role of English in various sectors, including politics, trade, technology, tourism, education, research, and the media. However, despite its prominence, a persistent gap remains between the increasing demand for English proficiency and students' actual performance.

The literature identifies several barriers to effective English language teaching and learning. For instance, Bachore (2015) attributes students' poor performance in English to factors such as low teacher motivation, insufficient subject-matter mastery, large class sizes, a lack of teaching materials, and student discipline problems. Similarly, Aweke and Hussen (2019) highlight weaknesses in English instruction at the foundational level, along with limitations in the curriculum and broader systemic challenges.

Agajie's (2020) investigation of English-medium instruction at the college level has provided valuable insights; however, there remains a need for focused research at the secondary school level. In particular, few studies have examined how English is taught and practiced within the classroom context of Ethiopian secondary schools. Moreover, research conducted in different educational or cultural contexts, such as Ali and Jaff's (2014) study at the Muslim University of Morogoro, cannot be directly applied to settings like Bonga Town in the Kafa Zone of Ethiopia, where linguistic, pedagogical, and infrastructural conditions differ significantly.

Therefore, this study seeks to explore the key challenges and instructional practices involved in the teaching and learning of English language skills in two selected secondary schools in the Kafa Zone. It aims to examine how English is used by teachers and students in classroom settings and to identify contextual factors that may hinder effective language acquisition. Understanding these factors is essential for improving instructional quality and supporting students' academic success. Hence, the study is guided by the following research questions:

1. How frequently do teachers and students use English during classroom teaching and learning activities?
2. What are the main challenges that limit the consistent teaching and learning of English as a foreign language in the selected high schools?
3. To what extent do teachers use English effectively as a medium of instruction in the classroom?

Review of Related Literature

The Importance of Learning English

English has become the contemporary lingua franca, driven by the increasing demand for global communication and information exchange. Approximately 400 million people speak English as their native language, another 400 million use it as a second language, and about 800 million use it as a foreign language (Kgsupport.com). Bachore (2015) noted that English is the preferred language in many African countries. Moreover, around 70% of internet content is in English, highlighting its importance in connecting people worldwide. Aizawa et al. (2023) further emphasize that proficiency in English creates opportunities for success in higher education, employment, international travel, and engagement with global culture.

In Ethiopia, English plays several crucial roles, particularly in the education sector. Bachore (2015) noted that English has long served as the medium of instruction from Grade 9 onwards. However, regional policies have varied, with some regions adopting English as the medium of instruction beginning in Grade 5, while others introduced it in Grade 7 or Grade 9 in the previous

education curriculum (Heugh et al., 2006, as cited in Bachore, 2015). Beyond the education sector, English is also essential for accessing information from key government institutions, including the Ministry of Education. In response to ongoing concerns about educational quality, the Ethiopian government appointed a group of experts to evaluate the national curriculum and propose reforms. As a result, the Ethiopian Education Development Roadmap (2018–2030) introduced significant changes: English is now taught as a subject beginning in Grade 1 and used as the medium of instruction starting in Grade 7 or Grade 8, depending on the regional context (MoE, 2023).

English Language Learning and Teaching Strategies

Language learning strategies are the conscious processes that learners use to enhance their language acquisition. Wu (2013) emphasizes that effective strategies are vital for developing communicative ability in a second language. Research shows that successful learners employ a wider variety of effective strategies compared to their less successful peers (Rubin, 1975). Oxford (1990) categorized these strategies into six groups: memory, cognitive, compensation, metacognitive, affective, and social strategies (Chamot & Kupper, 1989). In this regard, Andrew (2007) suggests that successful language learning involves developing a personalized approach and fully participating in learning activities. Learners should remain open-minded and accepting of the target language while gaining the necessary technical knowledge to address linguistic challenges. They are encouraged to experiment with and plan strategies that enhance their understanding of language systems, continually seek meaning in what they learn, and actively use the language in authentic communication. In addition, effective learners regularly monitor their own language use, willingly practice, and cultivate the ability to think directly in the target language, all of which contribute to more efficient language acquisition and greater communicative competence.

Teachers, like learners, possess diverse teaching styles. Hadfield and Hadfield (2008) note that some teachers are methodical planners, while others adopt a more flexible approach to instruction. An effective teacher plays a significant role in facilitating learning, from lesson design to classroom management. Cora and Paul (2006) describe effective teachers as those who understand learners' needs, provide constructive feedback, and create an enriching learning environment.

Challenges in Learning English as a Foreign Language (EFL)

Identifying the challenges faced by students and teachers is crucial for improving English language education. A significant challenge for learners is the lack of an immersive language environment. Smith (2013) described challenges such as dealing with a new language and adapting to a new learning context. Additionally, the quality of English language textbooks in Ethiopia is often inadequate, failing

to provide sufficient practice opportunities (Akbari, 2015). Issues such as outdated content and a lack of engaging tasks hinder effective learning before curriculum reform had been done.

Understanding various teaching methods is crucial for addressing challenges in English language education. The grammar-translation method emphasizes grammar rules and translation, while the direct method focuses on natural language acquisition (Richards & Rodgers, 2001). The audio-lingual method prioritizes aural and oral skills (Brown, 2007), and communicative language teaching aims to enhance learners' communicative competence through interactive activities (Richards & Rodgers, 2001; Brown, 2007).

However, applying these methods effectively can be challenging. A multifaceted approach is necessary to improve students' English language skills, integrating diverse methods to meet different learning needs. For foundational knowledge, the grammar-translation method can be useful, while direct and audio-lingual methods offer immersive experiences. Communicative language teaching fosters interaction among students, making learning more dynamic. Encouraging active participation through group discussions, role-plays, and collaborative projects promotes engagement and practical language use. Furthermore, incorporating real-life contexts, media, and technology enhances relevance and enjoyment in learning. Providing constructive feedback, promoting extensive reading, and creating a positive, risk-free environment are essential for building students' confidence and competence. Tailoring instruction to individual needs ensures that all learners can progress effectively, overcoming the inherent challenges of diverse teaching methods.

Research Methods

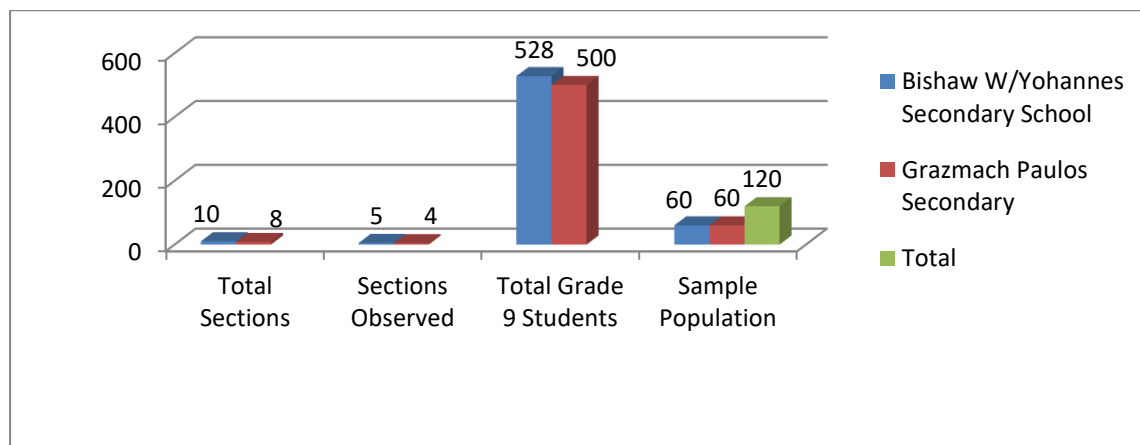
This study explored practices and challenges in teaching and learning the English language using a mixed-methods approach that combined quantitative and qualitative research. The researcher used a descriptive research design, as noted by Kumar (2015) and Best and Khan (2006), which should align with study objectives and provide a detailed analysis of existing situations. The research involved a questionnaire for students to gather firsthand data on learning strategies, challenges, and teacher support, as well as teacher interviews focusing on instructional techniques and the content of the textbook. Additionally, classroom observations were conducted to assess teaching strategies and the challenges faced by both students and teachers.

Sampling Techniques

The study involved selecting participants from two government high schools in Bonga Town, focusing on both students and teachers. For the student sample, a probability sampling technique was employed,

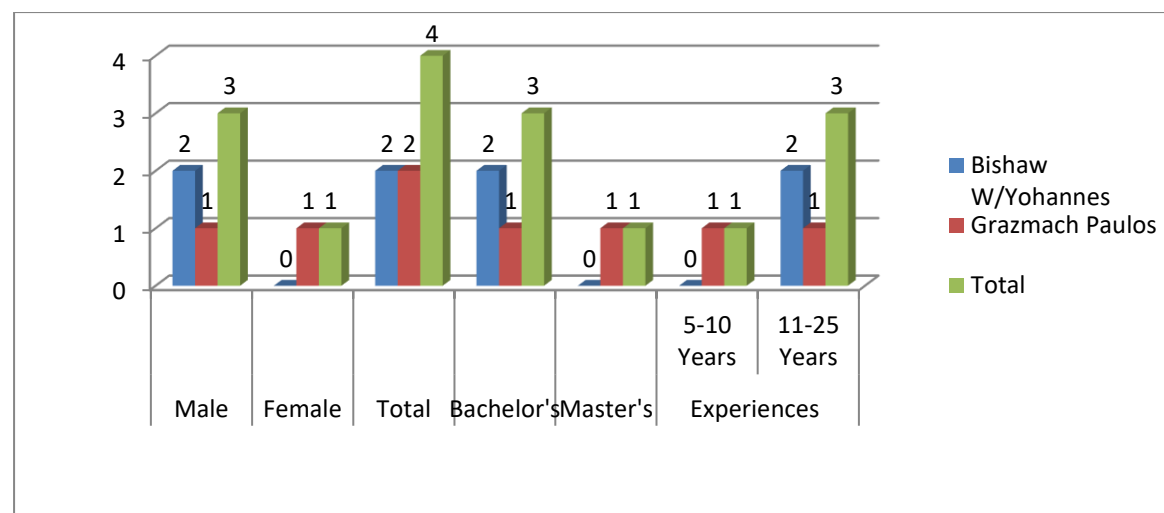
specifically simple random sampling, to select 120 Grade 9 students. Of these, 60 students were selected from Bishaw W/Yohannes School and 60 from Grazmach Paulos Secondary School, as shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Student Participants



A purposive sampling method was employed to select 50% of grade 9 English instructors, ensuring the inclusion of those with varied educational backgrounds and teaching experiences from both schools. A total of 4 teachers participated, with 3 (75%) being male and 1 (25%) female. Among them, 2 (50%) held master's degrees, while the other 2 had bachelor's degrees. Their teaching experience varied, with 1 teacher having 10 years and the other 3 between 11 and 25 years, providing a rich perspective on the teaching of English in this context as shown in Figure 2 below.

Figure 2: Teachers' Demography



Data Collection Instruments

To gather comprehensive data on the challenges faced by teachers and students in learning English,

three data collection tools were utilized: questionnaires, classroom observations, and teachers' interviews. The students' questionnaire focused on techniques, difficulties, and teaching methodologies, including both open-ended and closed-ended questions organized into three sections, with instructions in Amharic for clarity. 4 out of 8 grade 9 English teachers participated in interviews, providing insights into students' language proficiency, motivation, and challenges; these interviews were conducted in English and lasted 20 to 30 minutes, with data recorded for accuracy. Classroom observations supplemented this data by allowing the researcher to witness teaching and learning dynamics, conducted in one classes from Bishaw W/Yohannes and two from Grazmach Paulos, thus offering a deeper understanding of classroom interactions and practices.

The Validity and Reliability of the Instruments

Validity and reliability are essential aspects of any research instrument, ensuring that results are accurate and consistent (Jain & Angural, 2017). This section discusses the methods used to assess the validity and reliability of the instruments employed in the study.

Validity of the Instruments

The face validity and content validity of the instruments were examined by experienced English instructors from Bonga College of Education. They reviewed the questionnaires to ensure that the content was aligned with the study's objectives. Feedback from these experts led to adjustments in the length and the overall structure of the instruments.

Reliability of the Reading Test

To ensure the reliability of the attitude questionnaires, Cronbach's Alpha coefficient was used. Cronbach's Alpha statistical measure assesses the internal consistency of a set of items in a questionnaire, indicating how well the items measure the same construct (Jain & Angural, 2017). Accordingly, the reliability of survey questionnaires was measured and displayed in the table below:

Table 1: Reliability statistics for challenges and language practice in the classroom

Variables	Cronbach's Alpha	N of Items
EFL Classroom Challenges	0.83	13
Use of English Language	0.85	12

Data Analysis

The data collected through the students' questionnaire, classroom observations, and teachers' interviews were analyzed using both quantitative and qualitative methods. The quantitative data from the questionnaires were analyzed using tables that indicated the mean and standard deviation using SPSS version 20. In contrast, the qualitative data obtained from classroom observations and interviews were analyzed thematically to provide deeper insights.

Research Findings

This section presents the analysis and interpretation of data collected from the students' questionnaire, classroom observations, and teachers' interviews. To effectively convey the quantitative data, tables and figures are utilized, as they provide a clear and concise way to present extensive information (Kumar, 2015). The analysis begins with an examination of the students' questionnaire, focusing on their preferences for different language skills, illustrated through relevant figures to highlight the findings.

Results of the Student Preferences for Various Skills

Students' preferences for English language skills were surveyed to determine the extent to which they give equal importance to the four basic skills of English language. The results are presented in the following Figure 3 below.

Figure 3: Student preferences for different skills.

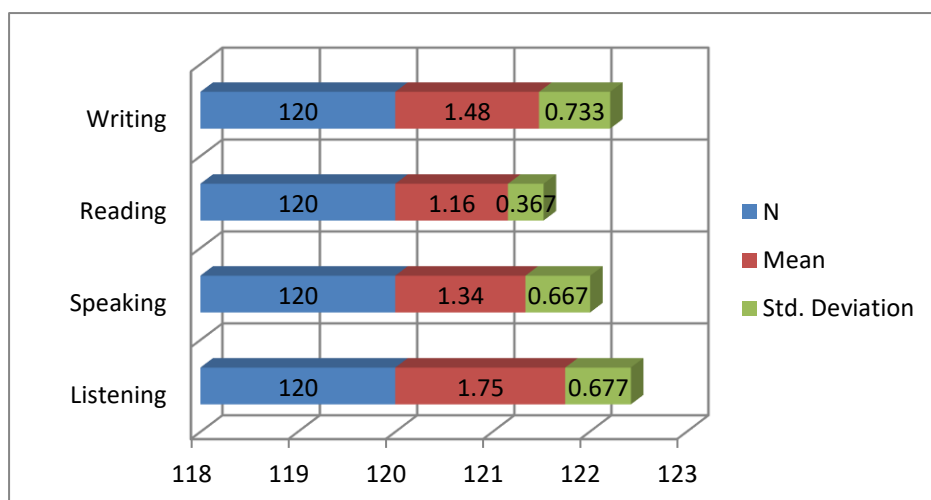


Figure 3 shows that students generally have a dislike for all English language skills, with reading being the least favored (mean = 1.16), indicating strong consensus on this dislike. Listening

(mean = 1.75) is the most preferred skill, but still reflects a moderate level of dislike. Speaking (mean = 1.34) also shows a relatively low preference, while writing (mean = 1.48) reveals a moderate dislike, with more varied opinions among students. Overall, the data suggests that students lack enthusiasm for these skills, particularly reading, which they find least appealing.

Table 2: Results of Teachers and Students use of English Language

Items	Statements	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
1	The English teacher uses English exclusively during lessons.	120	1.82	0.898
2	The teacher uses mother tongue when students struggle to understand concepts.	120	2.03	0.930
3	The teacher predominantly speaks in the mother tongue (Amharic/others).	120	2.33	1.048
4	The teacher employs a lecture method for teaching English skills.	120	2.02	0.991
5	The teacher facilitates group discussions.	120	1.83	0.895
6	The teacher allows students to ask and answer questions in English.	120	2.04	0.771
7	The teacher encourages students to speak in English.	120	1.87	0.934
8	The teacher creates a comfortable environment for practicing English.	120	2.10	1.024
9	The teacher teaches English through translation (L2-L1).	120	2.10	1.024
10	The teacher uses pair and group work in teaching English skills.	120	1.98	0.840
11	Students are motivated to use English in class.	120	2.40	0.938
12	Students participate in group discussions and pair work.	120	2.37	0.925

The data in Table 2 present the mean and standard deviation values of teachers' and students' classroom practices regarding the use of English in teaching and learning. The overall mean scores, ranging between 1.82 and 2.40 on a four-point scale (1 = Always, 2 = Sometimes, 3 = Rarely, 4 = Never), indicate that most of the observed practices occur only sometimes rather than consistently. Teachers were found to sometimes use English exclusively during lessons (M = 1.82, SD = 0.898) and to occasionally facilitate group discussions (M = 1.83, SD = 0.895) and encourage students to speak in English (M = 1.87, SD = 0.934). However, the relatively higher means for using the mother tongue (M = 2.03) and teaching through translation (M = 2.10) suggest that L1 still plays a significant role in classroom interaction.

Students' active involvement was also limited, as shown by moderate mean values for motivation (M = 2.40) and participation in group or pair work (M = 2.37). These results imply that, while English is used to some extent, both teachers and students tend to rely on the mother tongue, and communicative, learner-centered activities are not regularly practiced. The findings highlight the need for greater emphasis on interactive and English-only classroom strategies to enhance students' language proficiency and confidence in using English.

Table 3: Challenges faced by Teachers and Students in EFL Classroom

Items	Statement	N	Mean	StD Deviation
1	Mother tongue impacts English learning.	120	3.81	1.132
2	Lack of group/pair work affects learning.	120	3.59	1.452
3	Teacher doesn't use English consistently.	120	2.83	1.471
4	Students struggle with English background issues.	120	3.82	1.207
5	Lack of motivation to speak English.	120	2.24	1.290
6	Absence of English textbooks.	120	2.84	1.550
7	Uncomfortable seating arrangement.	120	2.68	1.409
8	1 to 5 seating limits individual participation.	120	3.13	1.455
9	Frequent use of mother tongue by the teacher.	120	3.28	1.328
10	Students fear speaking English with peers.	120	3.70	1.351
11	1 to 5 leaders dominate group presentations.	120	3.57	1.430
12	Perception of English as difficult.	120	3.00	1.619
13	Limited encouragement to use English outside class.	120	2.95	1.144

The data in Table 3 present the main challenges encountered by both teachers and students in the English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classroom. The mean values, which range from 2.24 to 3.82 on a four-point scale, indicate that several challenges are perceived as frequent or highly influential. The highest mean scores were recorded for *students' weak English background* ($M = 3.82$, $SD = 1.207$) and *the influence of the mother tongue on English learning* ($M = 3.81$, $SD = 1.132$), revealing that students' prior language knowledge and heavy reliance on their first language are among the most critical obstacles to effective English learning. Similarly, *students' fear of speaking English with peers* ($M = 3.70$, $SD = 1.351$) and *the lack of group or pair work* ($M = 3.59$, $SD = 1.452$) show that classroom interaction is hindered by low confidence and limited communicative opportunities. Moderate challenges were associated with *teacher inconsistency in using English* ($M = 2.83$) and *the absence of English textbooks* ($M = 2.84$), suggesting gaps in teaching resources and classroom language policy. Seating-related issues, such as *uncomfortable arrangements* ($M = 2.68$) and *the dominance of 1-to-5 group leaders* ($M = 3.57$), further restrict student participation. Meanwhile, the relatively lower mean for *lack of motivation to speak English* ($M = 2.24$) indicates that although students recognize the value of English, their engagement is limited by contextual and structural factors.

Overall, the findings imply that both linguistic and environmental factors, especially mother-tongue interference, inadequate communicative practice, and insufficient resources, significantly constrain the teaching and learning of English in the observed high schools. Strengthening English-only classroom policies, improving seating and resource availability, and fostering a supportive atmosphere for oral practice are therefore essential to improve EFL outcomes in this context.

The Result of Open-Ended Item of Students' Questionnaire

The qualitative findings from the open-ended items closely support and reinforce the quantitative results from the closed-ended questionnaire and classroom observations. Students' comments highlight limited exposure to English, with many reporting frequent use of their mother tongue both inside and outside the classroom. This perception aligns with the quantitative findings, where high mean scores were recorded for "*Mother tongue impacts English learning*" (M = 3.81) and "*Frequent use of mother tongue by the teacher*" (M = 3.28), confirming that first language interference remains a major challenge. Similarly, students' concern about lack of teacher encouragement and institutional support ("There is not enough encouragement from teachers and the school") is consistent with the mean score for "*Limited encouragement to use English outside class*" (M = 2.95) and "*Lack of motivation to speak English*" (M = 2.24). These results suggest that insufficient motivational and pedagogical support reduces students' willingness to practice English.

Furthermore, the complaint that teachers rely heavily on lecture-based instruction ("Teachers spend too much time lecturing instead of helping us practice") triangulates with the quantitative data indicating that teachers *sometimes* use the lecture method (M = 2.02) and *rarely* facilitate pair or group work (M = 1.98). This supports the conclusion that English teaching in the observed schools remains largely teacher-centered, offering limited opportunities for communicative practice. In addition, students' remarks about an ineffective English club reflect the broader issue of minimal English use beyond the classroom, echoing the quantitative finding that *students are only sometimes motivated to use English in class* (M = 2.40). Overall, the convergence of both data types demonstrates that the main obstacles to effective EFL learning in the study schools are insufficient English exposure, lack of interactive teaching methods, weak extracurricular support, and heavy reliance on the mother tongue.

Results of Classroom Observation

This classroom observation report presents findings from three observation sessions conducted for three English language teachers across two schools (one section from Grazmach and two sections from Bishaw schools). The purpose was to assess the extent to which teachers implemented recommended strategies, such as the use of English as the medium of instruction, classroom interaction techniques, student engagement practices, etc. Hence, nine observations (three observations per section) were conducted across two schools, as shown in Table 4 below:

Table 4: Frequency of classroom observation

No.	How often teachers and students perform the following activities in classroom b/n 40 minutes range?		Always	Sometimes	Rarely	Never
1	The teacher uses classroom language	F	3	4	2	-
		%	34	44	22	-
2	The teacher uses group and pair works	F	-	3	3	3
		%	-	34	33	33
3	The teacher motivates students to use English in classroom while teaching	F	2	1	2	4
		%	22	11	22	44
4	The teacher uses English the whole period	F	3	6	-	-
		%	34	66	-	-
5	The teacher initiates students to ask and answer questions in English	F	-	2	4	3
		%	-	22	44	34
6	The teacher gives a chance students to present their group and pair works in English	F	1	2	2	4
		%	11	22	22	45
7	The classroom discipline is maintained	F	-	3	4	2
		%	-	34	44	22
8	Students ask questions in English	F	-	-	5	4
		%	-	-	56	44
9	All students have English text book	F	-	-	6	3
		%	-	-	66	34
10	Students listen teacher's talk	F	-	4	3	2
		%	-	44	34	22
11	Teacher gives examples before students do the activities	F	2	4	3	-
		%	22	44	34	-
12	The teacher encourages students during their attempt	F	-	5	3	1
		%	-	56	33	11

As Table 4 above shows, the classroom observation conducted in two schools across three sections and observed three times each, intended to evaluate how English teachers and students use classroom English and engage in communicative practices during 40-minute lessons. The results revealed that teachers' use of classroom English was inconsistent. While 34% of the teachers always used English, 44% used it sometimes, and 22% rarely used it. Similarly, although some teachers (34%) used English throughout the lesson, most (66%) did so only occasionally. Group and pair work were minimally practiced, with only a third of the teachers sometimes organizing them, another third rarely doing so, and the rest never using them. This indicates a preference for teacher-centered approaches such as the lecture method. Furthermore, only a few teachers (22%) consistently motivated students to use English, while 44% never did so. Teachers also rarely initiated students to ask and answer questions in English or allowed them to present their group and pair work in English, suggesting limited opportunities for students to develop communicative competence.

Students' participation and engagement were also found to be low. More than half of the students (56%) rarely asked or answered questions in English, and 44% never did. A large proportion of students (66%) did not bring or use English textbooks during lessons, and many were not attentive to teachers' instruction. Although some teachers (44%) sometimes gave examples before students' activities and 56% occasionally encouraged students' attempts, consistent support and encouragement were lacking. Classroom discipline was maintained to some extent, but not uniformly, as only 34% of teachers always managed it well. Overall, the findings show that both teachers and students demonstrated weak use of English and limited engagement in communicative classroom practices. Teaching was largely traditional, teacher-dominated, and lacked sufficient student interaction, motivation, and practice opportunities, highlighting the need for a shift toward more interactive and student-centered English language teaching approaches.

During the classroom observation, several issues were noted regarding both students and teachers based on open-ended items. The qualitative findings derived from the observer's open-ended notes strongly reinforce and expand upon the quantitative results from the classroom observation checklist. Both data sources consistently demonstrate that teachers' use of English in the classroom is limited and inconsistent. The observed instances where teachers made grammatical and structural errors such as "*Yesterday, we are discussed*" or "*Now we have discuss about...*" confirm the quantitative finding that only 34% of teachers always used English, while 44% did so only sometimes. This inconsistency in language use aligns with the survey results indicating that *teachers do not use English effectively as a medium of instruction* ($M = 2.04$) and *frequently rely on translation* ($M = 2.10$). Similarly, teachers' reliance on mother-tongue explanations, as observed when more than eight consecutive words were translated into Amharic, directly corresponds with the high mean score for "*Mother tongue impacts English learning*" ($M = 3.81$).

Moreover, issues such as narrow classroom space, overcrowding, and poor seating arrangements triangulate with the quantitative findings that *uncomfortable seating* ($M = 2.68$) and *1-to-5 grouping limitations* ($M = 3.13$) hinder active participation. The observation that 60–70% of students did not bring textbooks further supports the challenge identified in the survey data regarding *absence of English textbooks* ($M = 2.84$). In addition, the lack of group and pair work noted in most observed classes is consistent with both the closed-ended classroom observation results, where only about a third of teachers sometimes organized pair or group activities, and the students' questionnaire responses showing low engagement in collaborative tasks. The behavioral issues observed, including students ignoring teachers' instructions, inattentiveness, and poor classroom management, confirm the quantitative findings that classroom discipline and student motivation were only maintained *sometimes*

(34–44%). Finally, instances of inappropriate teacher language and poor interactional techniques, such as overuse of filler expressions (“isn’t it”) or derogatory remarks, reveal deep-rooted professional and pedagogical challenges that cannot be captured through numeric data alone.

Overall, the triangulated evidence from quantitative and qualitative sources clearly indicates that both structural and pedagogical factors, such as large class sizes, insufficient teacher proficiency, limited resources, and reliance on translation, severely restrict effective English language teaching and learning. These combined findings underscore the need for targeted professional development, improved classroom conditions, and stronger emphasis on communicative English practices to enhance EFL teaching quality in the studied schools.

Results of the Teachers’ Interview

The teachers’ interview data are organized under key themes that emerged from the research questions. Each theme includes relevant interview responses from four teachers, coded as T1, T2, T3, and T4 to maintain confidentiality and provide clarity for the reader.

Theme 1: Students’ English Language Proficiency and Language Use during Instruction

The interviews with teachers revealed that students’ proficiency in English is generally low, which significantly affects their participation in classroom activities. Teacher 1 (T1) stated, “*The students’ English proficiency is very poor. They always ask me to translate everything into Amharic. They don’t understand unless I explain in their mother tongue.*” Teacher 2 (T2) highlighted the challenge of balancing curriculum coverage with language assessment: “*Most of the time I just try to finish the textbook because the content is too large. I don’t have time to assess their proficiency deeply. I know they struggle, but I focus on covering the portion.*” Teacher 3 (T3) emphasized students’ reluctance to speak in English, noting, “*My students prefer writing and grammar tasks. They completely avoid speaking because they are afraid of making mistakes. When they speak, other students laugh at them.*” Similarly, Teacher 4 (T4) pointed out the lack of exposure to English outside the classroom: “*Their language level is very low. They prefer speaking Amharic in class, and they lack exposure to English both at home and at school.*”

These responses collectively indicate that students’ low English proficiency, fear of making mistakes, reliance on the mother tongue, and limited exposure to English contribute to minimal participation and reduced practice of communicative skills during lessons.

Theme 2: Students’ Participation, Motivation, and Attitudes toward English

The interviews highlighted that students’ participation, motivation, and attitudes toward English were generally low. Teacher 1 (T1) observed, “*Only a few students show interest. Most of them are passive.*”

They don't see English as important or useful." Teacher 2 (T2) noted the influence of students' educational background, stating, *"Some students come from rural areas where they didn't get a strong English foundation. They just play, talk, or disturb others in class."* Teacher 3 (T3) emphasized students' perception of English as a difficult subject: *"Students think English is difficult. That's why they don't try. Even if I encourage them, only a few respond positively."* Similarly, Teacher 4 (T4) reported challenges in motivating students: *"I try to motivate them, but many still feel shy or uninterested in participating. They avoid answering questions or speaking in English."*

These responses suggest that low motivation, negative attitudes, and limited interest in English hinder students' active engagement in classroom activities. The data indicate that both individual and contextual factors, such as prior educational exposure and perceived difficulty of English, contribute to minimal participation and reluctance to use English during lessons.

Theme 3: Classroom Discipline Issues

The interviews revealed that classroom discipline is a significant challenge in the observed schools. Teacher 1 (T1) noted, *"Some students always disturb the class. They talk, throw things, or ignore instructions."* Teacher 2 (T2) highlighted the lack of preparation and obedience among students, stating, *"They don't bring their books or exercise books. They are not obedient and resist doing class work."* Teacher 3 (T3) emphasized the limited number of disciplined students, observing, *"Very few students are disciplined. The majorities just act out or stay disengaged."* Similarly, Teacher 4 (T4) reported, *"Discipline is a real problem, especially among students who are already struggling. They disrupt the learning environment."*

Theme 4: Availability of English Teaching Materials and Aids

The interviews highlighted limitations in the availability and use of teaching materials and aids in English classrooms. Teacher 1 (T1) stated, *"We have textbooks, but that's it. There are no visual or audio aids to help students understand better."* Teacher 2 (T2) pointed out that the issue is not just the absence of aids but also teachers' limited use, saying, *"The problem isn't lack of aids, it's that most teachers don't prepare or use them."* Teacher 3 (T3) emphasized the reliance on textbooks alone, noting, *"Teaching aids like pictures and audio are essential, but we don't use them. Teachers rely only on textbooks."* Similarly, Teacher 4 (T4) observed, *"There are enough textbooks, but no supplementary materials. I think more training is needed on how to use teaching aids."*

Theme 5: Effectiveness and Appropriateness of the English Textbook

The interviews revealed mixed perceptions regarding the effectiveness and suitability of the English textbook used in the classrooms. Teacher 1 (T1) noted, *“The book has all the language skills, but some parts are too hard. The poems and some grammar sections are not suitable.”* Teacher 2 (T2) pointed out the challenge of its length, stating, *“The textbook is large and difficult to cover in one school year. Students get discouraged by the amount.”* Teacher 3 (T3) highlighted mismatches with students’ proficiency, saying, *“Some content doesn’t match the students’ level. They lose interest quickly.”* Teacher 4 (T4) emphasized the importance of adaptation, explaining, *“The book is helpful in general, but only if the teacher adapts it. Otherwise, it’s overwhelming.”*

Theme 6: Major Challenges Faced by Teachers and Students

The interviews revealed several significant challenges affecting both teaching and learning of English in the selected schools. Teacher 1 (T1) stated, *“Students don’t want to bring their books. They won’t participate unless I use Amharic.”* Teacher 2 (T2) highlighted infrastructural and curriculum-related issues, explaining, *“The classroom is overcrowded and not suitable. The book is too repetitive and long.”* Teacher 3 (T3) emphasized students’ low language proficiency and the lack of instructional aids, noting, *“Most students lack basic English skills. Without visuals or other aids, it’s hard to make them understand.”* Teacher 4 (T4) pointed out motivational challenges, saying, *“Students are not interested. They just copy homework and never try to learn seriously.”* These responses indicate that teachers face multiple obstacles, including overcrowded classrooms, insufficient teaching aids, and students’ lack of motivation and basic skills of English.

Theme 7: Suggested Solutions to Improve Teaching and Learning

The interviews highlighted several strategies recommended by teachers to enhance the effectiveness of English teaching and learning. Teacher 1 (T1) emphasized student responsibility, stating, *“Students must become more responsible, bringing textbooks and doing the homework regularly.”* Teacher 2 (T2) focused on instructional methods, suggesting, *“Teachers should prepare teaching aids and try to make the lesson more interactive.”* Teacher 3 (T3) recommended professional development and curriculum adjustments, noting, *“We need training on teaching methods. Also, textbooks need to be revised to suit student levels.”* Teacher 4 (T4) proposed additional academic support and resources, stating, *“Tutorials would help weaker students. Also, more reading materials should be provided.”*

Overall, these suggestions indicate that improving EFL teaching and learning requires a combined effort: students need to take more responsibility for their learning, teachers should adopt interactive and well-supported instructional approaches, and schools should provide suitable resources,

training, and remedial support to address students' varied proficiency levels. Implementing these solutions could significantly enhance students' English competence and classroom engagement.

Discussion

The main objective of this study was to investigate the challenges faced in teaching English as a foreign language (EFL) and the classroom practices employed in secondary schools in Kafa Zone, Bonga Town, Ethiopia. To achieve this objective, a mixed-methods approach was employed, combining classroom observations, interviews, and questionnaires administered to both teachers and students. These instruments enabled the study to capture quantitative patterns, such as the frequency of mother-tongue use, as well as qualitative insights into teachers' and students' experiences and perceptions of EFL instruction.

The findings reveal a range of persistent challenges in teaching and learning English in the studied context. Despite the policy emphasis on English as a medium of instruction (MoE, 2018), students continue to underperform in core language skills, particularly reading and speaking, which are essential for both academic success and communicative competence. While these outcomes appear at the surface level as low student performance, they reflect deeper systemic and pedagogical issues. Limited access to quality teaching materials, inadequate teacher training, and insufficient opportunities for authentic language exposure may collectively constrain effective language learning. Similar patterns have been reported by Mihret et al. (2024), who found that EFL learners in Ethiopian higher education institutions face systemic challenges such as inadequate instructional resources and limited exposure to communicative environments. Bedilu and Degefu (2024) also emphasize that structural and resource-related barriers significantly affect teachers' ability to implement effective EFL pedagogy, suggesting that these problems begin earlier in the educational pipeline, particularly at the secondary school level.

One of the most prominent challenges identified in this study is the overreliance on the mother tongue during classroom instruction. The high mean score recorded for mother-tongue use indicates that teachers frequently switch to Amharic or other local languages rather than maintaining English as the primary language of communication. While this practice may help clarify complex concepts and maintain classroom control, excessive reliance on the mother tongue significantly reduces students' exposure to authentic English input, which is essential for language acquisition. From a pedagogical perspective, this phenomenon may reflect teachers' own linguistic insecurity or limited confidence in their English proficiency. Faltamo (2019) similarly reported that frequent use of local languages in Ethiopian secondary schools limits students' exposure to English, constraining both language

acquisition and communicative competence. Aron-Salvacion (2023) likewise found that both teachers and students encounter substantial challenges when shifting from local languages to English in English-medium instruction (EMI) environments, largely due to low language proficiency and limited institutional support.

The findings also indicate that teacher-centered instruction remains the dominant pedagogical approach in the observed classrooms. Interactive teaching strategies such as pair work, group discussions, and communicative tasks were rarely observed. This reliance on teacher-centered practices may stem from several underlying factors, including large class sizes, time constraints, and limited professional training in communicative language teaching (CLT). Kafale, Arficho, and Abera (2024) reported similar findings in Sidama Region, highlighting that overcrowded classrooms, insufficient materials, and lack of pedagogical training limit teachers' ability to implement student-centered learning strategies. Deressa and Beyene (2025) further observed that oral communication skills are often neglected in Ethiopian secondary schools due to constrained pedagogical strategies and teachers' low confidence in facilitating spoken English. These conditions hinder learners' opportunities to actively use English, contrasting with the CLT principles advocated by Richards and Rodgers (2001) and Brown (2007), which emphasize learner participation, meaningful interaction, and authentic communication as central to language acquisition.

Psychological factors also contribute to the challenges observed in the classroom. Some students demonstrate low motivation and limited engagement in English learning activities, particularly in reading tasks. Reading was identified as the least favored skill among learners, which may reflect both linguistic difficulties and negative attitudes toward the subject. When students perceive English as difficult or inaccessible, their motivation to engage in learning activities declines. Moreover, negative classroom experiences, such as limited feedback, lack of encouragement, or inappropriate teacher behavior, can further undermine students' confidence and willingness to participate in English communication. Classroom observations revealed that some teachers occasionally used grammatically inaccurate English, relied heavily on translation, and engaged in behaviors that could discourage student participation. Negewo et al. (2023) similarly reported that inadequate teacher competence and poor classroom management negatively affect student motivation and engagement, reinforcing the need for professional development and supportive teaching environments.

These classroom-level issues are closely linked to broader systemic factors affecting the implementation of English-medium instruction policies. While English plays a crucial role in global communication and national development, as emphasized by Crystal (2009) and Eshetie (2010), the practical implementation of EMI policies often faces significant challenges in resource-constrained

educational environments. In many cases, EMI policies are introduced without sufficient preparation of teachers, adequate instructional materials, or sustained professional development programs. Walga (2024) notes that such systemic gaps—particularly limited teacher training and resource shortages frequently undermine the effective implementation of language policies in Ethiopian secondary schools. Rose et al. (2022) similarly argue that in many Global South contexts, EMI policies are adopted without the necessary pedagogical and infrastructural support, resulting in ineffective classroom outcomes. The findings of this study reflect this broader pattern, demonstrating a clear gap between policy expectations and classroom realities in Bonga Town secondary schools.

Moreover, the challenges identified highlight the interconnected nature of systemic, pedagogical, and psychological factors influencing English language teaching. Teacher proficiency limitations, resource constraints, and inadequate professional development opportunities interact with student attitudes, motivation, and classroom dynamics to create a complex environment affecting learning outcomes. Addressing these challenges therefore requires more than isolated interventions. Effective improvement in EFL teaching will likely require comprehensive reforms, including strengthening teacher education programs, providing continuous professional development, improving access to teaching materials, and fostering supportive classroom environments that encourage active language use.

Conclusion

This study underscores the persistent challenges in English language instruction in secondary schools in Kafa Zone, Ethiopia. Despite national policies promoting English instruction from the early grades, classroom practices remain constrained by limited use of English, teacher-centered instructional approaches, weak classroom management, and insufficient instructional materials. In addition, students demonstrate low engagement in learning activities, particularly in reading and speaking, while some teachers face difficulties related to language accuracy and the effective application of pedagogical strategies.

Addressing these challenges requires a multifaceted response. Teacher training programs should prioritize communicative and student-centered methodologies while also strengthening teachers' English language proficiency. Furthermore, educational resources, including textbooks, audio-visual materials, and digital learning tools, should be made more accessible and equitably distributed across schools. Effective monitoring of policy implementation is also essential, and school leadership should play a proactive role in ensuring the consistent and appropriate use of English in

classroom instruction. At the same time, promoting student agency and creating supportive learning environments can enhance learners' motivation, confidence, and participation.

Overall, the challenges identified in this study are not limited to a particular school or teacher but reflect broader structural issues within the educational system. Bridging the gap between English-medium instruction (EMI) policy and effective classroom practice will require coordinated efforts from policymakers, educational institutions, and teachers. Strengthening teacher preparedness, improving instructional resources, and promoting learner-centered pedagogical approaches are therefore essential steps toward enhancing English language teaching and learning outcomes in Ethiopian secondary schools.

Limitation of the Study

This study investigated challenges and practices in teaching and learning English in two government high schools in Bonga Town, including four teachers and 120 Grade 9 students. While the mixed-methods approach, combining questionnaires, interviews, and classroom observations, provided detailed insights into student strategies, teacher practices, and classroom challenges, the small sample limits the generalizability of the findings to other schools or regions. Nevertheless, the study offers a context-specific analysis of existing situations, indicating issues such as overreliance on the mother tongue and limited exposure to authentic English input. Future research should examine the long-term impact of revised teaching approaches, investigate student-related issues, and conduct comparative studies across diverse regions to inform practical solutions. Ultimately, improving English language education in Ethiopia is not only essential for academic success but also for meaningful participation in a globalized world.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTION

From data collection to the final preparation of this manuscript, the author was responsible for all stages of the process.

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Diacritics as Key Predictors: Enhancing Word Recognition in Qur'ānic Texts Despite Contextual Constraints

ABSTRACT

It is known that diacritics (*ḥarakāt*) are essential to reading Arabic but their importance for accurate recognition of words has not been fully understood across text types and levels of reader expertise. This mixed-methods study explores the role of diacritics in how readers at different stages of lexical development decode Modern Standard Arabic (MSA) and Qur'ānic passages across two phases. In the first phase, a total of forty-five native Arabic-speaking readers from three educational levels were presented with ten unpracticed, undiacritized MSA sentences. In the second phase, after recording accuracy, speed, and errors, the top fifteen participants read ten Qur'ānic verses selected for complexity of context and orthographic similarities. Both phases used homographs and complex sentences to examine whether word recognition could be predicted from context. A retrospective verbal protocol was also used to assess how diacritics and context affected reading accuracy. It is found that, in MSA texts, reliance on diacritics decreases but remains important when contextual cues are weak while, in Qur'ānic texts, diacritics strongly enhance word recognition because contextual cues are limited. These findings support a simple Arabic word disambiguation model, highlighting that accurate initial reading of classical texts, including non-memorized Qur'ānic passages, relies heavily on diacritics regardless of the reader's level of skill.

Keywords: *Arabic reading, word recognition, diacritics, contextual disambiguation, Qur'ānic text, reading proficiency*

Introduction

Imagine reading many isolated words that appear identical but can convey completely different pronunciations and meanings depending on tiny vowel sounds (*diacritics: ḥarakāt*) that are usually not written. This is the everyday reality of Arabic literacy. In Arabic, words are typically written as 'rasm', a consonantal skeleton lacking short vowels, which creates lexical and phonological ambiguity and makes word recognition challenging (Bashir et al., 2023). At the core of reading research is word recognition, the cognitive process of extracting a word's sounds and meanings from its written form. It involves converting letters into sounds, accessing stored meanings, and integrating them into the text for comprehension (Koda, 2005). Relatedly, Arabic word recognition refers to the cognitive processes

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that transform printed letter strings into stored lexical representations and their associated sounds and meanings, involving grapheme-to-phoneme mapping, morphological processing, and access to lexical entries (Abu-Rabia, 1995; Alhussein, 2017). For instance, the sequence كَتَب can be read as كَتَبَ /kataba/ (“he wrote”), كُتِبَ /kutiba/ (“it was written”), or كُتُبَ /kutub/ (“books”). Because short vowels are generally absent, a single unvowelled string may correspond to multiple pronunciations and meanings, producing heterophonic homographs in which orthography alone does not determine pronunciation, and pronunciation alone does not determine meaning. Readers must therefore rely on key predictors, including diacritics, morphology, syntax, semantic context, and prior knowledge of Arabic orthography, to accurately recognize words (Ammar, 1997; Alhussein, 2017).

Arabic diacritics are commonly grouped into three sets: short vowels, nunation (*tanwīn*), and syllabification marks. The short vowels ‘*fatha*, *damma*, and *kasra*’ represent the sounds /a/, /u/, and /i/, while *tanwīn* adds final nasalized endings such as /an/, /un/, and /in/. Additional marks such as *sukūn* and *shaddah* indicate syllable structure by marking the absence of a vowel or consonant gemination (Bashir et al., 2023). These diacritics serve as powerful predictors and orthographic cues (Ryding, 2005; Abu-Rabia & Haj, 2021), helping map written Arabic to correct pronunciation and reduce ambiguity. When diacritics are absent, heterophonic homographs create ambiguity in both pronunciation and meaning, whereas homophonic homographs share spelling and pronunciation but differ in meaning even when diacritics are present (Peleg & Eviatar, 2009, as cited in Alhussein, 2017). Fully diacritized texts scaffold pronunciation and support word recognition, particularly for beginning readers. With experience, readers increasingly rely on contextual, morphological, and syntactic cues, which reduces but does not eliminate their dependence on diacritics (Boudelaa, 2014). Nevertheless, challenges persist in texts where vocabulary is rare and sentence structures are complex, and where phonological processing poses a major obstacle, often leading to spelling errors, and to ambiguity in word recognition and interpretation (Abu-Rabia & Taha, 2006; Maroun & Hanley, 2019; Hermena et al., 2021).

The present study focuses on how diacritics function as the primary cue for resolving phonological ambiguity in Arabic reading, particularly when context provides limited guidance. Morphology and syntax were disregarded in this study due to concerns about superficial data and the need for tight control over the tasks. More precisely, it examines how reliance on Arabic diacritics as a predictive cue shift depending on the reader’s developmental stage and the type of text. Cue weighting can be summarized as:

- **Modern Arabic reading:** Context > Diacritics
- **Classical/Qur’ānic reading:** Diacritics > Context

In other words, the greater the phonological ambiguity of a word and the weaker the contextual cues, the more critical diacritics are for correct recognition. Building on this conceptualization, the present study addresses the following questions:

1. How do diacritics support word recognition across developmental stages of Arabic readers?
2. To what extent does reliance on diacritics decrease as readers increasingly depend on contextual cues in modern texts?
3. When reading Classical or non-memorized Qur'ānic passages, how does sentence- or verse-level embedding influence the use of diacritics for accurate word recognition?

This study highlights a model of Arabic reading in which diacritics play a central role in resolving lexical ambiguity, especially when contextual cues are limited. It clarifies how diacritics interact with phonology and linguistic context and provides a framework for supporting accurate word recognition in both modern and classical Arabic texts 'Qur'ānic passages in particular'.

Literature review

Guided by the present study's focus on Arabic word recognition, this literature review outlines the Arabic language and Qur'ānic Arabic, with emphasis on diacritics in different reading contexts, while highlighting a gap in how Qur'ānic features are treated in existing research.

The Arabic Language: Alphabet, Varieties and Diacritics

Arabic is a Semitic language written from right to left. It uses an abjad (consonantal) writing system, where the symbols usually represent consonants, and the reader adds the vowels when reading. It has 28 letters, including 25 consonants and three long vowels, most of which have up to four forms depending on their position (Saiegh-Haddad & Joshi, 2014). The script also uses thirteen diacritical marks for short vowels, nunation, and syllables. They help the reader know the correct pronunciation and grammatical meaning (Azmi & Alsaiani, 2014). Arabic first appeared between the first and fourth centuries CE (Al-Azami, 2020) and is generally divided into Classical Arabic (CA), Modern Standard Arabic (MSA), and Dialectal Arabic (DA). CA is prescriptive, while MSA preserves classical structures and adds modern vocabulary, which allows it to be used for both traditional and contemporary contexts (Azmi et al., 2019).

The Arabic script has no capitalization, which makes proper names difficult to identify. In addition, the absence of diacritics creates lexical ambiguity, since a word such as عقد /ʕaqd/ can mean "contract," "knot," "tie," "necklace," or "to make complex" (Azmi & Aljafari, 2018). To reduce this ambiguity, Arabic uses diacritics that function as orthographic cues indicating short vowels and correct pronunciation. Research shows that these marks help readers select the intended meaning of ambiguous words, although alternative meanings may remain partially active (Maroun & Hanley, 2017; Maroun,

2018). At the same time, fully vowelized texts can slow down early reading and cause longer eye fixations, but they usually help readers understand the text better later, showing a speed–accuracy trade-off (Hermena & Reichle, 2020; Hermena et al., 2021). Readers may also process diacritics parafoveally before directly looking at a word, which allows them to anticipate pronunciation and meaning (Hermena et al., 2021). When diacritics are absent, readers tend to rely on the most frequent interpretation, whereas their presence guides them toward context-specific meanings. That is to say, the positive role of diacritics in terms of Arabic word recognition and reading performance suggests that adding them to instructional texts not only helps Arabic L2 learners resolve word ambiguity but also enhances their overall reading and pronunciation skills (Midhwah & Alhawary, 2020). Because of these benefits, selective use of diacritics on ambiguous words is often recommended in teaching to support learning without increasing visual load for skilled readers. However, since Modern Standard Arabic often omits diacritics and depends on context to interpret meaning, ambiguity persists. This for example increases the difficulty of tasks like translation and Named Entity Recognition (NER) in natural language processing systems (Azmi & Almajed, 2015 as cited in Bashir et al., 2023).

Qur'ānic Considerations and Diacritics

Qur'ān is the central religious text of Islam. Muslims believe it was revealed in Arabic to Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) over 23 years, ending in 632 CE. The word *Qur'an* appears around 70 times in the text and comes from the Arabic verb *qara'a*, meaning “to read” or “to recite” (Britannica, 1999). Because it is recited in Arabic, the language is the liturgical language for about 1.8 billion Muslims, most of whom are non-Arabs. Therefore, knowing Arabic can help readers understand the Qur'an's true message. The text has 114 chapters and 6,236 verses, totaling 157,935 words, of which 5,277 are unique. Its chapters cover daily life, social conduct, history, and future events and are written in a concise, almost poetic style (Bashir et al., 2023).

The Qur'an is fully vowelized, which ensures accurate recitation. In this text, diacritics guide pronunciation more than reading speed or continuous comprehension. They help learners read correctly without changing the traditional script (Boulhrir & Chekayri, 2025). Over 1,400 years, thousands of scholars have studied the Qur'an and produced extensive commentary. However, previous studies rarely examine how diacritization affects real-time word recognition in Qur'ānic texts. Research on selective diacritics and eye-tracking is also limited. This study addresses that gap, highlighting the moderating role of diacritics in reading Qur'ānic texts.

Methodology

The study at hand uses a mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative and qualitative data. In Phase One, quantitative analysis measures reading performance in terms of accuracy, speed, and errors. It compares beginner, skilled, and advanced readers using unpracticed ambiguous words, homographs,

and complex sentences, which were intentionally structured to focus on the role of context. In Phase Two, qualitative observation examines how advanced readers interpret ambiguous words and homographs in undiacritized Qur'anic verses. A retrospective verbal protocol (Ericsson & Simon, 1993) was used in this phase. It helps to see whether context is present or absent, which reduces reliance on diacritics for word recognition and whether adding diacritics improves reading accuracy.

Research Design

This study is grounded in a constructivist–cognitive framework, which treats reading as an active process of meaning construction (van den Broek et al., 2005; Khadka, 2024). The present study acknowledges that, in Arabic, readers can often correctly read undiacritized text by using syntax, morphology, and sentence context, but diacritics still improve comprehension of ambiguous words and semantic decisions for them (Maroun & Hanley, 2017; Al-Samarraie et al., 2020). In other words, reliance on diacritics may decrease as readers develop syntactic and morphological awareness and contextual inference skills. Yet it addresses the gap of whether this reliance persists when reading classical texts and non-memorized Qur'anic passages in particular.

Participants

The study used purposive sampling to select 45 native Arabic speakers from three educational levels. Primary students were in Grades 3–5, middle students in Grades 1–4, and secondary students in Grades 1–3. Each group had 15 participants. All reported no reading impairments or difficulties with diacritized texts. Participants were grouped by educational stage, reflecting different reading development levels. **Table 1** shows the characteristics of each group and the corresponding phase.

Table 1. Participant Groups, Reading Levels, and Assigned Phases

Group	Reading Level	Description	N Participants	Phase
Group 1	Beginner Readers	Primary school pupils at an early stage of learning to read Modern Standard Arabic (Grades 1–2 excluded)	15	Phase One
Group 2	Developing Readers	Middle school students with developing proficiency in reading Modern Standard Arabic	15	
Group 3	Proficient Readers	Secondary school students with high proficiency in reading Modern Standard Arabic and familiarity with undiacritized texts	15	
Top 15 performers	Advanced Readers	Selected from Phase One based on mean accuracy scores; read contextually complex Qur'anic verses	15	Phase Two

Corpus Selection

The reading materials were divided into two phases. Phase One included 10 sentences in Modern Standard Arabic, presented without diacritics, for all 45 participants across beginner, developing, and proficient reader groups. Sentences ranged from 9 to 15 words and contained homographs and ambiguous words. Each participant read all 10 sentences, resulting in a total of 450 readings. This phase measured baseline reading performance, recording errors, attempts, hesitation and self-corrections. Phase Two involved the top 15 performers (represented as a group) from Phase One and used 10 Qur’anic verses selected for orthographic complexity. Each participant read all 10 verses, giving a total of 150 readings.

Phase One Process

In *Phase One*, a structured grid was used to record participants’ performance while reading ten undiacritized sentences. For each sentence, the criteria recorded included Reading Time (s), Errors, and Accuracy (%). First, reading time was noted, as longer times may indicate hesitation or difficulty. Next, errors on the first attempt were counted, and accuracy was calculated based on these errors. Finally, participant-level accuracy was computed as the average across all ten sentences.

Table 2: Phase One Reading Assessment Grid for Word Recognition

Errors (1 Attempt)	Reading Time (s)	Base Accuracy (%)
0	≤10	100
0	10–13	95
0	>13	90
1	≤10	85
1	10–13	80
1	>13	75
2	≤10	70
2	10–13	65
2	>13	60
3	≤10	60
3	10–13	55
3	>13	50

Note: Given that each sentence contains only 9 to 15 words, Sentences with 4 or more errors are excluded from scoring as they represent extreme difficulty.

The study examines how readers rely on context to determine meaning, disregarding syntax and morphology, although these cues can sometimes help. Accuracy decreases when errors occur, and longer reading times indicate hesitation. For instance, in the undiacritized sentence

“كتب المؤرخ علم عن عقد المدينة القديمة وسلم النتائج للمكتبة” (S6), كتب may initially be read as *kataba* (“he wrote”) or *kutub* (“books”), علم as *‘alima* (“knew”) or *‘allama* (“taught”), عقد as *‘aqd* (“knot/contract/necklace”), and سلم as *handed/greeted* or *ladder*, but the narrative context clarifies the

intended meanings.

In “سلم المعلم اللوح المكتوب و عقد للطالبة المتفوقة” (S9), سلم, اللوح, and عقد could each be interpreted in multiple ways, yet context indicates the correct readings.

Phase Two Process

Proficient readers were asked to read selected Qur'anic verses aloud. The verses were first presented without diacritics to examine how contextual cues alone support disambiguation. For example, وجوه ناظرة and ناظرة (75:22–23) illustrates contextual differentiation between ناظرة ناظرة. Similarly, (6:164) ولا تزر وازرة وزر أخرى and (35:28) إنما يخشى الله من عباده العلماء, فكاين من قرية أهلكتها وهي ظالمة فهي خاوية (22:45), where interpretation may depend on contextual inference when diacritics are absent. Additional examples include (12:31) فلما رأينه أكبرنه وقطعن أيديهن فما استطاعوا أن لأحتكن نريته إلا قليلا قال أرايتك هذا الذي كرمت علي لنن أخرتن إلى يوم القيامة (18:97), and (17:62), illustrating how lexical ambiguity can be resolved through context. After the initial reading, the same words were presented with full diacritics and read again. A retrospective verbal protocol was then used, in which participants described any hesitations, misreadings, or self-corrections. This allowed the researchers to examine whether diacritics improved reading accuracy and how readers relied on contextual cues.

In Phase One, participants read unpracticed Modern Arabic texts, which were generated by the researchers specifically for this study and not taken from existing sources. Mean scores were calculated for each group to allow for ANOVA analysis. In Phase Two, advanced readers were observed reading ambiguous Qur'anic verses, and researchers recorded correct word recognition and whether diacritics improved accuracy. Participation in the study was voluntary, all data were anonymized, and no prior memorization of Qur'anic texts was emphasized.

Results

This section presents the main findings. Phase One shows reading performance of Modern Standard Arabic without diacritics by proficiency, and Phase Two examines recognition of Qur'anic words without diacritics.

Phase One – Quantitative Results

The first phase measured reading performance of 45 participants across three proficiency levels: Beginner, developing, and proficient. Three dependent variables were analyzed: Accuracy (%), Reading Time (s), and Errors.

Table 3. ANOVA results for the dependent variables across groups in phase one

Dependent Variable	df (Between)	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Time	2	148.062	8558.252	< 0.001
Errors	2	135.576	544.789	< 0.001
Accuracy%	2	49,760.056	1062.602	< 0.001

The ANOVA analysis showed that the three groups differed significantly on reading time, errors committed, and level of accuracy. This indicates that group membership in Phase One had a strong effect on performance. Overall, performance improved progressively from the Emergent group to the Developing group, and from the Developing group to the Proficient group, as reflected in **Figure 1**, which highlights the mean differences between groups based on post hoc analysis.

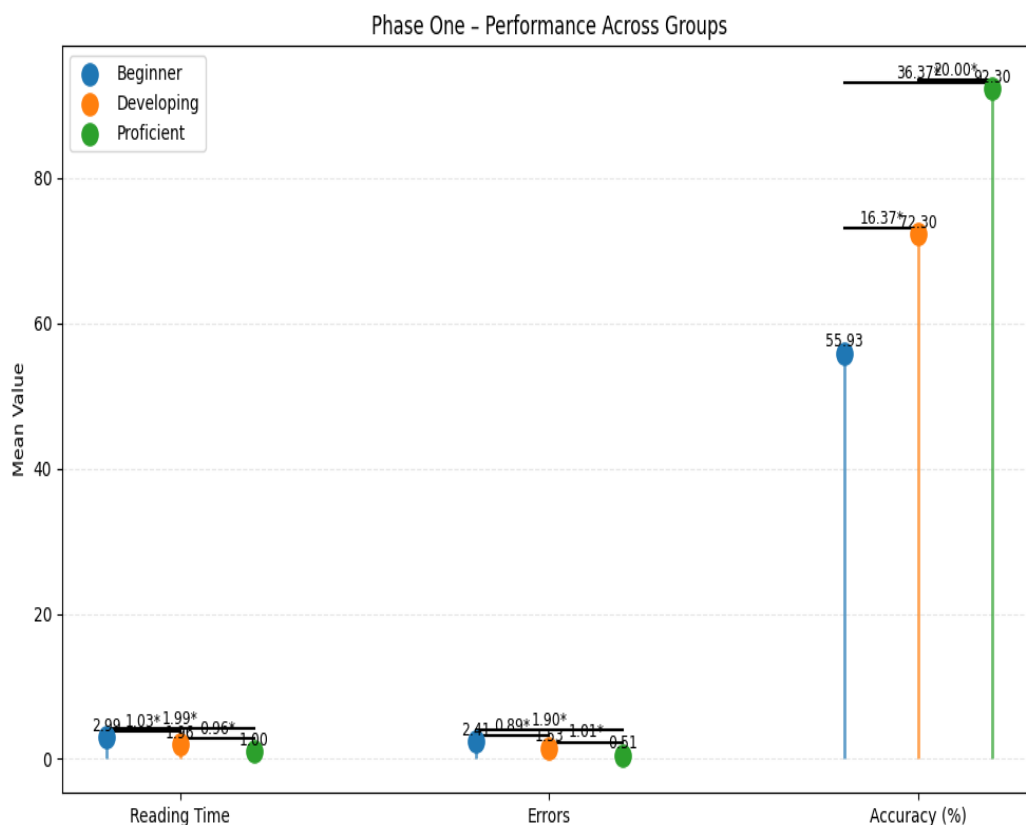


Figure 1. Mean performance differences across groups in phase one

The three groups differed significantly on reading time, errors committed, and accuracy when reading sentences without diacritics in Phase One. For reading time, the Beginner group read slower than the Developing group by 1.03 seconds and slower than the Proficient group by 1.99 seconds. The Developing group also read slower than the Proficient group by 0.96 seconds. Errors decreased progressively, with the Beginner group committing 0.89–1.90 more errors than the other groups. Accuracy improved, with the Beginner group scoring 16.37–36.37% lower than the other groups. All

differences were statistically significant according to Tukey HSD post hoc tests. Performance improved clearly from Beginner to Developing to Proficient, with the Proficient group consisting of 15 top performers who advanced to the second phase.

Phase Two – Qualitative Results

Phase Two analyzed advanced readers reading Qur'anic verses, initially without diacritics. Hesitations, the need for diacritics, and self-corrections were recorded. Sentences were then provided with diacritics for ambiguous or complex words after hesitation, followed by the retrospective technique.

Table 4 . Word Recognition from Context in Undiacritized Qur'anic Texts

Verse	Word	Phonetic Transcription	Recognized?	Cue Used	Diacritics Needed?	Self- Correction?
75:22– 23	ناضرة	nādirah	Yes	Context	No	No
75:22– 23	ناظرة	nādirah	No	Limited context	Yes	Yes
35:28	العلماء	al-'ulamā'	No	Minimal context	Yes	Yes
6:164	وزر	wizr	Yes	Context	No	No
12:31	أكبرنه	akbarnahu	No	Limited context	Yes	Yes
18:97	نقبا	naqba	No	Minimal context	Yes	Yes
17:61	أسجد	a-asjudu	No	Minimal context	Yes	Yes
17:62	أرأيتك	ara' aytuka	No	Limited context	Yes	Yes
22:45	مشيد	mashid	No	Minimal context	Yes	Yes
22:45	معطلة	mu' aṭalah	Yes	Context	Minimal	No
2:260	فصرهن	faṣorhunna	No	Minimal context	Yes	Yes
80:31	فاكهة	fākihatin	Yes	Context	Minimal	No

The retrospective verbal protocols showed that readers sometimes struggle with Qur'anic words without diacritics. They reported hesitations, misreadings, and self-corrections when context was limited. In 75:22–23, ناضرة was recognized correctly because the context helped. But ناظرة caused hesitation. Readers had to pause and self-correct. In 17:61 (أسجد) and 17:62 (أرأيتك), the words were

difficult to read without diacritics. Readers said the orthography and limited context made them unsure of the correct reading. Words like العلماء (35:28) and مشيد (22:45) also caused difficulty. Participants reported that the limited context did not give enough clues, so diacritics were necessary for correct reading. In contrast, words such as وزير (6:164) and فاكهة (80:31) were read correctly because the context was clear.

Participants noted four main reasons for difficulty:

1. Semantic ambiguity (e.g., ناضرة vs. ناظرة)
2. Synatactic structure: العلماء
3. Limited context
4. Complex spelling (e.g., أ رأيتك , أسجد)
5. Rare or less common words (e.g. , عجاب , مشيد , نقبا)

So, these results show that diacritics are crucial when context alone is not enough. The verbal reports helped identify where readers struggled and when they relied on extra cues to read correctly.

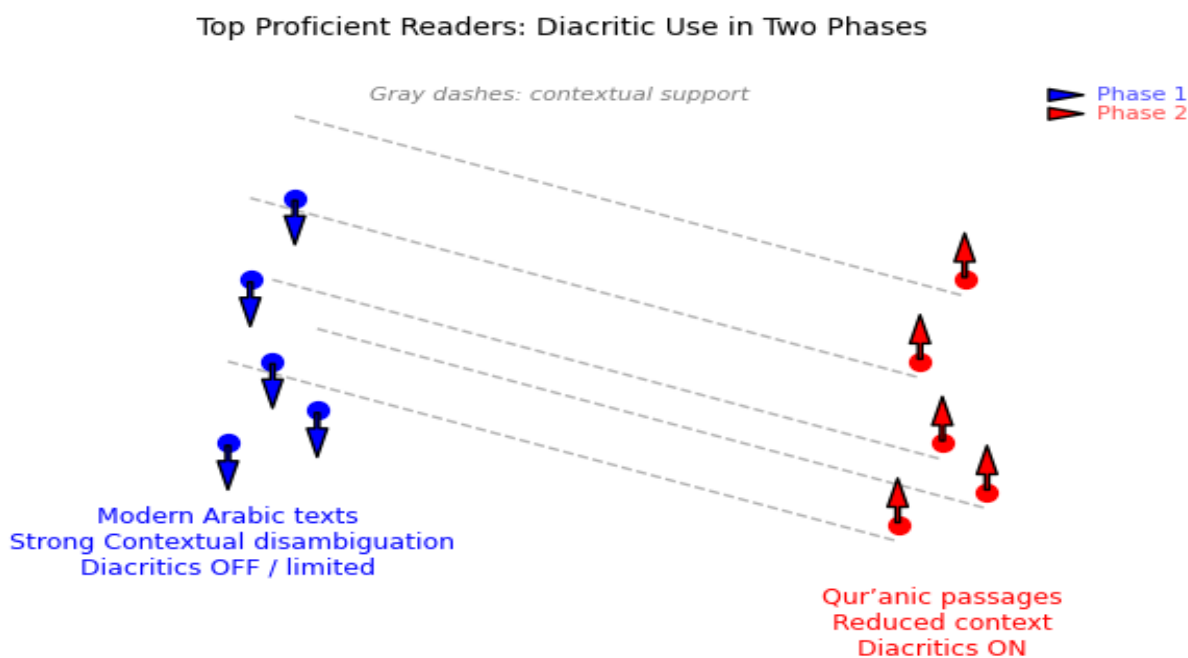


Figure 2 . Proficient readers' reliance on diacritics across two reading contexts

Figure 2 illustrates the reading strategies of fifteen highly proficient readers across two phases. In Phase 1, involving unpracticed Modern Arabic texts, readers rely primarily on contextual cues which result in low diacritic usage. In Phase 2, corresponding to Qur'anic passages with limited context, readers increase their reliance on diacritics. Gray dashed lines represent contextual support, which decreases as readers move to Phase 2 because Qur'anic passages provide less contextual

disambiguation, leading to greater diacritic usage. These findings indicate that even highly proficient readers adjust their approach according to text type: contextual cues alone may suffice in modern texts, whereas precise diacritic information becomes essential in non-memorized Qur'anic passages.

Discussion

The findings highlight the critical role of diacritics in Arabic word recognition, particularly in texts with high lexical ambiguity. In Phase One, which involved modern Arabic texts, beginners made more errors and had lower accuracy than intermediate and proficient readers. This suggests that when developmental stage is low, readers rely more heavily on diacritics to correctly identify words. Intermediate readers performed better but still benefited from diacritics for less frequent or ambiguous words. Proficient readers recognized most words correctly without diacritics, relying primarily on context. These results align with Hermena et al. (2021), who found that diacritics provide vowel information that disambiguates homographs and supports accurate word recognition, particularly in later sentence processing. They also align with Abu Rabia and Siegel (1995), who reported that both skilled and poor Arabic readers improved accuracy when reading words with context, and that skilled readers benefited more from context than poor readers. Importantly, their study shows that diacritics (vowels) improve reading accuracy for all readers, especially when context is limited. This explains why beginners in our study depended more on diacritics, while proficient readers could rely more on context.

In Phase Two, with Qur'anic passages, even proficient readers depended heavily on diacritics. Context alone was often insufficient due to rare, archaic, or specialized vocabulary. This demonstrates that diacritics are essential for accurate first-pass reading in classical texts, regardless of reader skill.

Conclusion and Implications

This study shows that diacritics are essential for accurate word recognition in Arabic, especially in Classical and Qur'anic texts. Skilled readers can use context to recognize some words without diacritics, but words with high phonological ambiguity still require them. The more ambiguous a word is and the weaker the available cues, the more critical diacritics become. These findings have practical relevance for literacy instruction, curriculum design, assessment, and reading of classical or religious texts.

Key questions for future research include whether diacritics can be selectively introduced to improve reading in different types of texts, such as Qur'anic passages, or whether they are unnecessary for certain readers. It is also important to determine which diacritics are most critical for accurate word recognition: shaddah (consonant doubling) or short vowels (ḥarakāt). Another question concerns those

who memorize the Qur'an: do they rely on diacritics, and if so, are diacritics a learned habit rather than a functional necessity? This is particularly relevant because the Qur'an exists in only one fixed version, unlike other texts that can be modified or rewritten. Answering these questions will allow future studies to move beyond single-word recognition and explore how selective use of diacritics interacts with context and semantic expectations in authentic Qur'anic passages. This is to guide educators, curriculum developers, and NLP designers. For Classical and Qur'anic texts, diacritics are essential. This benefits both non-native and native speakers to support accurate word recognition.

Limitations

The current study has several limitations. First, the reported percentages of cue usage and recognition rates for advanced readers are not directly supported by previous research. Second, reading in actual Qur'anic or classical texts was not fully measured, which limits generalizability. Third, the contribution of syntax, morphology, and other factors to word recognition is not clearly quantified. Future studies could investigate which cues are most influential across text types:

- Classical/Qur'anic texts: Diacritics > Morphology > Syntax > Context
- Modern texts: Context > Morphology > Syntax > Diacritics

Fourth, the retrospective design relies on participants' reflections, which may introduce bias. Finally, purposive sampling, while suitable for targeting specific reader profiles, limits generalization to all Arabic readers.

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