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Classroom Discourse In A Multilingual Context: Navigating Identity Confusion Among Tertiary Students In Ghana

Samuel Bruce Kpeglo [1], Maxwell Seyram Kumah[2] , Ebenezer Giddi[3]

[1] *St. Teresa's College of Education, Hohoe, Ghana*
[2] *St. Teresa's College of Education, Hohoe, Ghana*
[3] *St. Francis' College of Education, Hohoe, Ghana*

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Abstract

This study investigated the complex dynamics of classroom discourse and identity negotiation among tertiary students in Ghana's multilingual educational environment. Using a mixed-methods approach, 320 students from four Ghanaian Colleges of Education participated in a comprehensive examination of how multilingual classroom discourse practices influence identity formation and academic engagement. Data collection included classroom observations, discourse analysis, semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, and validated identity assessment instruments administered over two academic semesters. Results revealed that 74% of students experienced moderate to high levels of identity confusion when navigating between English as the medium of instruction, indigenous Ghanaian languages, and peer communication patterns. Thematic analysis identified four primary sources of identity confusion: linguistic code-switching pressures, cultural authenticity conflicts, academic legitimacy concerns, and peer group dynamics. Students employed three main identity navigation strategies: compartmentalization (keeping linguistic identities separate), strategic switching (context-dependent language choices), and identity integration (blending multiple linguistic selves). The study found significant correlations between frequency of indigenous language use in academic settings and both cultural identity strength ($r = .68$, $p < .001$) and academic self-efficacy ($r = .52$, $p < .001$). However, institutional language policies often created tension between authentic self-expression and academic success. Implications for multilingual education policy, pedagogical practice, and institutional support systems in Ghana's higher education context are discussed.

Keywords: multilingual education, classroom discourse, identity confusion, indigenous languages, cultural identity.

1. Introduction

Ghana's tertiary education system represents a complex multilingual landscape where English serves as the official medium of instruction while students maintain strong connections to over 70 indigenous languages (Guerini, 2014) including Akan, Ewe, Ga, Dagbani and Hausa. This linguistic diversity creates unique challenges and opportunities in classroom discourse, where students must navigate multiple language systems while constructing their academic and cultural identities. The present study examined how tertiary students in Ghana experience and negotiate multilingual classroom discourse, with particular attention to the identity confusion that emerges from competing linguistic demands.

In Ghana's educational context, English functions as the language of formal academic discourse, inherited from the colonial period and maintained as a unifying force in a linguistically diverse nation (Owu-Ewie, 2006). However, students' home languages carry deep cultural significance and represent authentic identity expression. This creates what Canagarajah (2011) described as a "translingual space" where multiple languages and identities intersect, sometimes harmoniously and sometimes in conflict. The concept of identity confusion in multilingual contexts refers to the psychological and social

disorientation students experience when their linguistic practices in academic settings conflict with their sense of authentic cultural expression (Pavlenko & Blackledge, 2004). In Ghana's tertiary institutions, this phenomenon is particularly pronounced as students transition from secondary education, where some indigenous language use may be tolerated, to college settings where English dominance is more strictly enforced. Recent educational reforms in Ghana have emphasized the importance of multilingual education, with policies encouraging mother tongue instruction in early years (Ministry of Education, 2013). However, implementation at the tertiary level remains inconsistent, creating uncertainty about appropriate linguistic behaviour in academic contexts. This study addressed the gap between policy intentions and classroom realities by examining how students actually experience multilingual discourse in their daily academic lives. The study was guided by four primary research objectives. First, it aimed to examine the nature and extent of identity confusion experienced by tertiary students in Ghana's multilingual classroom environments. The second objective focused on identifying specific classroom discourse practices that contribute to or alleviate identity confusion among students. The third objective sought to analyze the strategies students employ to navigate multilingual classroom discourse while maintaining identity coherence. The final objective aimed to explore the relationships between multilingual discourse practices, identity confusion and academic outcomes in the Ghanaian tertiary education context.

1.1. Literature review

Ghana's language-in-education policy has evolved significantly since independence, reflecting ongoing tensions between English as a global language and indigenous languages as markers of cultural identity (Andoh-Kumi, 1997). Current policy officially supports multilingual education, recognizing 11 indigenous languages as sponsored languages for educational use. However, research indicates substantial gaps between policy and practice, particularly at the tertiary level (Opoku-Amankwa, 2009). Studies of Ghanaian multilingual education have documented both benefits and challenges of diverse linguistic environments. Owu-Ewie and Edu-Buandoh (2014) found that students who maintained connections to their indigenous languages demonstrated stronger cultural identity and community engagement. However, Davis and Agbenyega (2012) noted that institutional pressures often discouraged indigenous language use, creating internal conflict for students seeking academic success.

1.1.1. Classroom Discourse in Multilingual Contexts

Classroom discourse in multilingual settings involves complex negotiation between different linguistic codes, cultural norms, and power relations (García & Wei, 2014). In Ghana's context, classroom discourse patterns reflect broader societal attitudes toward different languages, with English often associated with prestige and academic competence while indigenous languages carry cultural authenticity but limited institutional capital (Guerini, 2014). Research by Probyn (2009) in similar postcolonial contexts demonstrated that students use multiple strategies to navigate multilingual classroom environments, including code-switching for clarification, heritage language use for peer solidarity, and English maintenance for teacher approval. However, these strategies can create cognitive and emotional stress when students feel fragmented across different linguistic identities. Hornberger and Link (2012) emphasized that classroom discourse in multilingual contexts serves multiple functions beyond simple communication, including identity performance, cultural maintenance, and resistance to monolingual norms. In Ghana's Colleges of Education (henceforth CoEs), these functions create particular complexity as students must balance institutional expectations with personal authenticity.

1.1.2. Identity Formation in Multilingual Educational Contexts

Identity formation among multilingual students involves negotiating multiple, sometimes competing, aspects of self-concept (Block, 2007). Norton's (2013) framework of "investment" in language learning provides insight into how students make strategic decisions about linguistic behaviour based on perceived returns in terms of academic success, social acceptance, and identity coherence. In Ghana's context, students must navigate what Blommaert (2005) termed "orders of indexicality" – hierarchical

arrangements of linguistic varieties that carry different social meanings and values. English indexes academic competence and social mobility, while indigenous languages index cultural authenticity and community belonging. This creates potential conflict when students must choose between different aspects of their identity in academic settings.

Recent research by Yevudey (2013) in Ghanaian secondary schools found that students experienced significant stress when required to suppress indigenous language use, leading to what the author termed "linguistic alienation." However, limited research has examined these dynamics specifically in tertiary education contexts, where students have greater autonomy but also face increased academic pressure.

1.1.3. Identity Confusion and Academic Performance

The relationship between identity confusion and academic performance in multilingual contexts has received increasing attention in educational research. May (2014) argued that students who experience fragmented linguistic identities may struggle with academic engagement and achievement, as cognitive resources are diverted to identity management rather than learning. However, other research suggests more complex relationships. Cenoz and Gorter (2017) found that students who successfully integrated multiple linguistic identities demonstrated enhanced metalinguistic awareness and academic flexibility. The key appears to be whether educational environments support identity integration or force identity compartmentalization. In Ghana's context, preliminary research by Edu-Buandoh and Otchere (2012) suggested that students who could draw on multiple linguistic resources in academic contexts showed enhanced problem-solving abilities and cultural competence. However, institutional barriers often prevented students from accessing these resources, leading to underutilization of multilingual capabilities.

1.2. Research questions

The study is guided by the following research questions:

1. What is the nature and extent of identity confusion experienced by tertiary students in multilingual classroom environments in Ghana?
2. Which classroom discourse practices contribute to or alleviate identity confusion among tertiary students in multilingual classrooms in Ghana?
3. What strategies do tertiary students employ to navigate multilingual classroom discourse while maintaining identity coherence?
4. What relationships exist between multilingual classroom discourse practices, identity confusion, and academic outcomes among tertiary students in Ghana?

2. Article structure

The study is organized into clearly defined and numbered sections. Following the abstract is the introduction, which set the background for the study by situating it within Ghana’s multilingual tertiary education context, outlining the research problem, objectives and guiding research questions. The overall structure of the article is explained in this current section 2 to guide readers through the organization of the study. Next is a comprehensive review of relevant literature, focusing on language-in-education policy in Ghana, classroom discourse in multilingual contexts, identity formation and the relationship between identity confusion and academic performance – all presented in section 3 of the study. Section 4 describes the methodology, detailing the research design, participants and sampling procedures, research instruments, data collection processes, and data analysis techniques employed in the study. Section 5 reports the findings of the study, presenting quantitative and qualitative results separately in line with the convergent mixed-methods design. In section 6, the findings are discussed in relation to existing theoretical frameworks and prior studies, highlighting implications for multilingual education and classroom discourse practices. It also outlines the implications for policy and pedagogical practice, followed by the limitations of the study and suggests directions for future research. Finally, the

study concludes with a summary of key findings and contributions of the study to research on multilingual classroom discourse and identity negotiation in Ghanaian tertiary education.

3. Method

3.1. Research Design

This study adopted a convergent mixed-methods research design, integrating quantitative and qualitative data to provide a comprehensive understanding of multilingual classroom discourse and identity confusion among tertiary students. The mixed-methods approach was deemed appropriate because identity negotiation in multilingual classrooms is both measurable (e.g., levels of identity confusion and academic self-efficacy) and experiential (e.g., students' lived linguistic practices and perceptions). Quantitative and qualitative data were collected concurrently, analysed separately, and then integrated during interpretation to allow for triangulation and corroboration of findings. The design enabled the study to capture not only the prevalence and correlates of identity confusion but also the discursive processes and interactional practices through which such confusion is constructed and navigated within classroom settings.

3.2. Participants and sampling

Participants for the study were drawn from four Colleges of Education representing different geographical and linguistic zones of Ghana: St. Teresa's College of Education (Hohoe), Presbyterian College of Education (Kibi), Foso College of Education (Assin Foso), and Offinso College of Education (Offinso). A total of 320 student-teachers (n = 80 per college) participated. The study employed a stratified random sampling technique to ensure fair representation across major student subgroups. The population was stratified by academic discipline, year level, and linguistic background, reflecting the multilingual and socio-academic diversity within Ghanaian Colleges of Education. From each stratum, participants were randomly selected using class lists and student registers.

This sampling method was chosen because identity confusion in multilingual settings is influenced by multiple intersecting factors — such as language repertoire, academic exposure, and level of professional training. Stratified random sampling therefore provided a robust framework for obtaining a balanced and representative sample that captures this diversity. The approach reduces selection bias and improves the external validity of findings (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018), while also supporting comparative analyses between linguistic and disciplinary groups. Given Ghana's multilingual landscape — where CoE students often speak English as a second language alongside one or more indigenous languages (Owu-Ewie & Edu-Buandoh, 2014) - this sampling method ensured that experiences of identity negotiation were examined inclusively across the diverse student body. The design thus aligns with methodological recommendations for multilingual and identity research, which emphasise the importance of proportional representation of linguistic subgroups (García & Wei, 2014; Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009).

Table 1. Demographic characteristics of study participants

Characteristic	N	%	M	SD	Range
Total Sample	320	100.0			
Age (years)			21.4	2.1	18-26
18-20	128	40.0			
21-23	152	47.5			
24-26	40	12.5			
Gender					
Male	178	55.6			
Female	142	44.4			
Academic Level					
Level 100	64	20.0			
Level 200	96	30.0			

Level 300	96	30.0
Level 400	64	20.0
Academic Discipline		
Arts and Humanities	112	35.0
Social Sciences	96	30.0
Science and Technology	80	25.0
Business	32	10.0
Primary Indigenous Language		
Akan (Twi/Fante)	144	45.0
Ewe	64	20.0
Ga	48	15.0
Dagbani	32	10.0
Other	32	10.0
Home Language Environment		
Primarily indigenous language	192	60.0
Mixed indigenous/English	96	30.0
Primarily English	32	10.0
Secondary School Type		
Public	224	70.0
Private	96	30.0

3.3. Instrument(s)

3.3.1. Multilingual Identity Confusion Scale (MICS)

The MICS was developed specifically for this study to measure identity confusion in multilingual educational contexts. The 30-item instrument assessed four dimensions of identity confusion: Linguistic Identity Fragmentation (8 items), Cultural Authenticity Conflict (8 items), Academic Legitimacy Concerns (7 items), and Social Identity Navigation (7 items). Items were rated on a 5-point Likert scale from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree." Sample items included "I feel like a different person when I speak English versus my indigenous language" and "I worry that using my home language makes me seem less academically serious." The instrument was validated through expert review by linguists and education specialists familiar with Ghana's multilingual context. Pilot testing with 75 students not included in the main study confirmed acceptable psychometric properties. Internal consistency reliability was $\alpha = .91$ for the total scale, with subscale reliabilities ranging from $\alpha = .83$ to $\alpha = .88$.

3.3.2. Classroom Discourse Practices Questionnaire (CDPQ)

The CDPQ assessed students' experiences with and attitudes toward different multilingual discourse practices in their academic environments. The 25-item questionnaire covered frequency of indigenous language use in various contexts, perceived institutional support for multilingualism, and strategies for managing language choices in academic settings. Internal consistency reliability was $\alpha = .86$.

3.3.3. Cultural Identity Strength Scale (CISS)

The CISS, adapted from Phinney's (1992) Multigroup Ethnic Identity Measure for the Ghanaian context, measured the strength of students' connections to their cultural heritage. The 15-item scale assessed cultural knowledge, cultural practices, and cultural pride. Reliability was $\alpha = .89$.

3.3.4. Academic Self-Efficacy Scale (ASES)

The ASES, adapted from Bandura's (2006) academic self-efficacy scale, measured students' confidence in their academic abilities across different linguistic contexts. The 12-item scale included items specific to multilingual academic performance. Reliability was $\alpha = .87$.

3.4. Data collection procedures

Data collection occurred over two academic semesters (August 2024 to May 2025) and involved multiple phases. Phase 1: Quantitative Data Collection took place during the first month of each semester. Students completed the survey instruments during regular class periods under standardized

conditions. Research assistants fluent in relevant indigenous languages were available to clarify questions, though all instruments were administered in English as requested by participants.

Phase 2: Classroom Observations involved systematic observation of 120 classroom sessions across all four CoEs, distributed equally across disciplines and year levels. Trained observers used structured protocols to document language use patterns, code-switching instances, teacher responses to indigenous language use, and student reactions to multilingual discourse. Each observation session lasted 90 minutes and was audio-recorded with permission.

Phase 3: Qualitative Data Collection included 80 semi-structured interviews (20 per college) and 16 focus group discussions (4 per college). Interview participants were selected to represent the full range of identity confusion scores and linguistic backgrounds. Interviews explored personal experiences with multilingual classroom discourse, strategies for identity navigation, and perceptions of institutional support. Focus groups examined peer dynamics and collective experiences of multilingual discourse challenges.

Phase 4: Discourse Analysis involved detailed analysis of recorded classroom interactions, focusing on code-switching patterns, teacher-student language negotiations, and instances of linguistic tension or support. A subset of 40 classroom sessions was transcribed and analyzed using conversation analysis techniques.

3.5. Data analysis

Quantitative data were analyzed using SPSS 28.0. Descriptive statistics characterized the sample and primary variables. Correlation analysis examined relationships between identity confusion, discourse practices, cultural identity, and academic outcomes. Multiple regression analysis investigated predictors of identity confusion and academic performance. ANOVA compared identity confusion levels across different demographic groups. Qualitative data from interviews and focus groups were analyzed using thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2006) framework. Initial coding was conducted by two researchers independently, with inter-rater reliability of $\kappa = .89$. Classroom observation data were analyzed using both quantitative content analysis (frequency of different discourse patterns) and qualitative interpretation of interaction dynamics. Discourse analysis of classroom recordings employed conversation analysis techniques to identify patterns of code-switching, repair sequences, and identity negotiation in real-time classroom interactions. Analysis focused on critical incidents where linguistic choices became sites of identity negotiation or conflict.

4. Results

In this section, we present results clearly and separately for quantitative and qualitative strands, consistent with a convergent mixed-methods design. Quantitative results are systematically reported first under a dedicated section, using tables and statistical summaries, including descriptive statistics (means, standard deviations, ranges), correlation matrices, ANOVA results, and multiple regression outputs. Tables are clearly labelled and key results are interpreted in the accompanying narrative, with appropriate reporting of effect sizes, coefficients, confidence intervals, and significance levels (e.g., r, β, p values). Qualitative results follow under a qualitative findings section and are presented thematically. Data from interviews, focus groups, classroom observations, and discourse analysis are organized into clearly named themes (e.g., linguistic code-switching pressures, cultural authenticity conflicts). Each theme is explained in prose and supported with verbatim participant quotations, which illustrate students' lived experiences and identity negotiations in multilingual classrooms. Subsections also describe identity navigation strategies and observational patterns, linking discourse practices to identity outcomes. In effect, this section integrates both strands at the interpretation level: quantitative patterns establish scope and relationships, while qualitative evidence provides depth, explanation and contextual meaning, strengthening the validity of the findings through methodological triangulation

4.1. Quantitative Findings; Descriptive Statistics

Table 2. Descriptive statistics for primary study variables

Variable	M	SD	Range	Skewness	Kurtosis
Identity Confusion (Total)	3.42	0.89	1.23-5.00	0.12	-0.34
Linguistic Fragmentation	3.58	0.95	1.00-5.00	-0.08	-0.41
Cultural Authenticity Conflict	3.48	0.91	1.25-5.00	0.15	-0.29
Academic Legitimacy Concerns	3.31	0.88	1.14-5.00	0.21	-0.18
Social Identity Navigation	3.31	0.84	1.43-5.00	0.18	-0.25
Discourse Practices					
Indigenous Language Use Frequency	2.87	1.12	1.00-5.00	0.28	-0.52
Institutional Support Perception	2.45	0.96	1.00-5.00	0.35	-0.18
Code-switching Comfort	3.21	1.04	1.00-5.00	-0.12	-0.63
Cultural Identity Strength	4.12	0.73	2.13-5.00	-0.56	0.24
Academic Self-Efficacy	3.78	0.68	2.08-5.00	-0.23	-0.17

Results indicated that 74% of students scored above the midpoint (3.0) on the overall identity confusion scale, with 32% scoring in the high range (4.0-5.0). Linguistic fragmentation emerged as the highest dimension of identity confusion, followed by cultural authenticity conflict.

4.1.1. Correlation Analysis

Table 3. Correlation matrix for primary study variables

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Identity Confusion Total	-							
2. Indigenous Language Use	-.34***	-						
3. Institutional Support	-.52***	.41***	-					
4. Code-switching Comfort	-.28***	.56***	.38***	-				
5. Cultural Identity Strength	-.18**	.68***	.29***	.45***	-			
6. Academic Self-Efficacy	-.41***	.52***	.48***	.31***	.34***	-		
7. Age	-.15**	.22***	.18**	.19**	.28***	.24***	-	
8. Academic Level	-.21***	.31***	.23***	.26***	.35***	.33***	.68***	-

Note. *p < .01. **p < .001.

Strong negative correlations emerged between identity confusion and indigenous language use frequency ($r = -.34$, $p < .001$), institutional support perception ($r = -.52$, $p < .001$), and academic self-efficacy ($r = -.41$, $p < .001$). Students who used indigenous languages more frequently and perceived greater institutional support experienced less identity confusion.

4.1.2. Group Differences

Table 4. Identity confusion by demographic characteristics

Characteristic	n	M	SD	F	P	η^2
Institution				8.47	< .001	.07
St. Teresa's College of Education, Hohoe	80	3.21	0.84			
Presbyterian College of Education, Kibi	80	3.38	0.89			
Foso College of Education, Assin Foso	80	3.52	0.91			

Offinso College of Education, Offinso	80	3.58	0.93			
Primary Indigenous Language				6.23	< .001	.06
Akan	144	3.31	0.86			
Ewe	64	3.48	0.89			
Ga	48	3.56	0.94			
Dagbani	32	3.71	0.98			
Other	32	3.62	0.91			
Home Language Environment				12.84	< .001	.08
Primarily indigenous	192	3.52	0.91			
Mixed indigenous/English	96	3.31	0.84			
Primarily English	32	3.18	0.79			

Post hoc analyses revealed that students from primarily indigenous language homes experienced significantly higher identity confusion than those from English-dominant homes. Offinso College of Education students, who come from predominantly middle and northern Ghana where indigenous languages are more dominant, showed the highest levels of identity confusion.

4.1.3. Regression Analysis

Table 5. Multiple regression analysis predicting identity confusion

Predictor	B	SE B	β	t	p	95% CI
Constant	4.89	0.31	-	15.77	< .001	[4.28, 5.50]
Indigenous Language Use	-0.18	0.05	-.23	-3.86	< .001	[-0.27, -0.09]
Institutional Support	-0.35	0.06	-.38	-6.12	< .001	[-0.46, -0.24]
Cultural Identity Strength	0.12	0.08	.10	1.52	.129	[-0.03, 0.27]
Academic Level	-0.08	0.03	-.15	-2.47	.014	[-0.14, -0.02]
Home Language Environment	0.15	0.06	.14	2.31	.021	[0.02, 0.28]

Note. $R^2 = .38$, $F(5, 314) = 38.42$, $p < .001$.

The model explained 38% of variance in identity confusion scores. Institutional support perception emerged as the strongest predictor (β = -.38), followed by indigenous language use frequency (β = -.23).

4.2. Qualitative Findings; Thematic Analysis

Analysis of interviews and focus groups revealed five major themes regarding multilingual classroom discourse and identity navigation.

4.2.1. Linguistic Code-Switching Pressures

Students described intense pressure to navigate between English and indigenous languages in academic contexts, often within single classroom sessions. A third-year Akan-speaking student explained: "Sometimes I understand the concept better when I think about it in Twi, but if I try to explain it in Twi to help my classmates, the lecturer gives us that look like we're not serious students. So we end up struggling in English when we could be learning better." Many students reported feeling cognitively exhausted from constant language monitoring and switching. A focus group participant noted: "By the end of the day, my brain is tired not from the academic content, but from trying to keep track of which language I'm supposed to use when."

4.2.2. Cultural Authenticity Conflicts

Students experienced tension between maintaining cultural authenticity through indigenous language use and meeting academic expectations through English proficiency. An Ewe-speaking student reflected: "When I speak only English in class, I feel like I'm betraying my culture. But when I use Ewe, I worry that people think I'm not educated enough. It's like I can never win." This theme was particularly

strong among students from rural backgrounds who maintained stronger connections to their indigenous languages. Many reported feeling fragmented between their "home self" and "college self."

4.2.3. Academic Legitimacy Concerns

Students worried that using indigenous languages would undermine their academic credibility, both with instructors and peers. A Dagbani-speaking student explained: "Even when I know the answer perfectly in Dagbani, I hesitate to speak because I'm afraid my English won't be good enough and people will think I don't belong here." These concerns were exacerbated by subtle institutional messages that positioned English as the marker of academic seriousness. Students reported instances where code-switching was discouraged or ignored by faculty.

4.2.4. Peer Group Dynamics and Identity Performance

Classroom discourse patterns were heavily influenced by peer group composition and dynamics. Students from similar linguistic backgrounds often formed supportive networks that allowed indigenous language use, while mixed groups defaulted to English. A focus group discussion revealed: "When it's just us Akan speakers, we can really dive deep into concepts because we can use our language. But in mixed groups, we have to perform this tertiary student' identity in English only." Students also described strategic identity performance, adjusting their linguistic behaviour based on perceived audience expectations and social hierarchies within peer groups.

4.2.5. Institutional Ambivalence and Mixed Messages

Despite official policies supporting multilingual education, students perceived mixed and often contradictory messages from their institutions. While some faculty encouraged indigenous language use for comprehension, others actively discouraged it. A senior student observed: "The College says they support our languages in the policy documents, but in reality, everything important happens in English. It feels like they're just paying lip service to multilingualism." This institutional ambivalence created uncertainty and anxiety among students about appropriate linguistic behaviour in different academic contexts.

4.3. Qualitative Findings; Identity Navigation Strategies

Three primary strategies emerged from the qualitative analysis: compartmentalization strategy, strategic switching strategy and identity integration strategy. Compartmentalization strategy involved keeping different linguistic identities separate across contexts. Students using this strategy maintained strict boundaries between home language use (for family and close friends) and English use (for academic contexts). While this strategy reduced immediate conflict, many students reported feeling fragmented and inauthentic. Strategic switching strategy involved contextual adaptation of language choices based on perceived audience and situation. Students became skilled at reading social cues and adjusting their linguistic behaviour accordingly. This strategy required significant cognitive effort but allowed for some flexibility in identity expression. Identity Integration Strategy involved actively seeking ways to blend multiple linguistic identities in academic contexts. Students using this strategy advocated for indigenous language use, formed multilingual study groups, and sought faculty who were supportive of linguistic diversity. While this strategy was most psychologically satisfying, it required institutional support and was not always feasible.

4.4. Classroom Observation Findings

Analysis of 120 classroom observations revealed distinct patterns in multilingual discourse practices across different contexts.

Table 6. Classroom discourse patterns by academic context

Context	Indigenous Language Use (%)	Code-switching Instances per Hour	Faculty Response

Humanities Seminars	24.3	8.7	Mixed (43% supportive)
Science Lectures	12.1	3.2	Mostly discouraging (78%)
Social Science Discussions	31.6	12.4	Generally supportive (67%)
Business Case Studies	18.7	5.9	Neutral (54%)
Group Work Sessions	45.2	18.3	Varied by group composition

Indigenous language use was highest in group work sessions and social science discussions, where collaborative learning created space for multilingual discourse. Science lectures showed the lowest indigenous language use, reflecting disciplinary norms that prioritized technical English vocabulary. Critical incident analysis revealed that moments of linguistic tension often occurred when students attempted to use indigenous languages for concept explanation but were redirected to English by faculty. These incidents frequently resulted in student withdrawal from participation rather than continued engagement in English.

5. Discussion

The findings revealed that multilingual classroom discourse in Ghana's tertiary education creates both opportunities and challenges for student identity development, consistent with theoretical frameworks proposed by García and Wei (2014) and Norton (2013). The high prevalence of identity confusion (74% of students) demonstrates that navigating multiple linguistic identities in academic contexts represents a significant challenge for Ghanaian tertiary students.

5.1. Identity Confusion in Multilingual Academic Contexts

The strong correlation between institutional support perception and identity confusion ($r = -.52$) aligns with Hornberger and Link's (2012) argument that educational environments significantly influence multilingual identity development. Students who perceived greater institutional support for their linguistic diversity experienced less fragmentation and more coherent identity development. This finding suggests that institutional policies and practices play a crucial role in either facilitating or hindering healthy multilingual identity formation. The emergence of linguistic fragmentation as the highest dimension of identity confusion supports Pavlenko and Blackledge's (2004) theoretical framework regarding fragmented identities in multilingual contexts. However, the Ghanaian context adds particular complexity due to the colonial legacy of English and the cultural significance of indigenous languages in defining authentic African identity. Students must navigate not only linguistic choices but also the political and cultural implications of those choices.

The finding that students from primarily indigenous language homes experienced higher identity confusion challenges assumptions that strong heritage language foundations provide protective factors in multilingual education. Instead, these students may face greater tension between home and school linguistic expectations, consistent with research by May (2014) on linguistic minority students in dominant language educational contexts.

5.2. Classroom Discourse Patterns and Identity Negotiation

The variation in indigenous language use across academic disciplines (ranging from 12.1% in science lectures to 45.2% in group work sessions) reflects what Blommaert (2005) described as "orders of indexicality" – hierarchical arrangements of linguistic varieties that carry different social meanings across contexts. Science education's emphasis on technical English vocabulary creates particular barriers to indigenous language integration, while humanities and social sciences offer more flexibility for multilingual discourse. The qualitative findings regarding peer group dynamics support García and

Wei's (2014) concept of translanguaging as a social practice. Students' strategic language choices in different peer configurations demonstrate sophisticated understanding of linguistic markets and social positioning. However, the cognitive exhaustion reported by many students suggests that constant linguistic monitoring exacts a psychological cost that may impact academic performance.

The prevalence of code-switching (averaging 8.7 instances per hour across contexts) indicates that multilingual discourse is a natural and frequent occurrence in Ghanaian classrooms, despite institutional policies that may discourage it. This finding aligns with Canagarajah's (2011) description of translingual practices as emerging organically in multilingual environments, regardless of official language policies.

5.3. Identity Navigation Strategies and Academic Outcomes

The three identity navigation strategies identified – compartmentalization, strategic switching, and identity integration – represent different approaches to managing the tension between authentic self-expression and academic success. The finding that students using integration strategies reported greater psychological satisfaction but required more institutional support highlights the environmental factors that influence successful multilingual identity development. The negative correlation between identity confusion and academic self-efficacy ($r = -.41$) suggests that fragmented linguistic identities may indeed impact academic performance, as proposed by May (2014). However, the positive correlation between indigenous language use and academic self-efficacy ($r = .52$) indicates that heritage language maintenance, when supported, can enhance rather than hinder academic success. These findings challenge deficit-based assumptions about indigenous language use in academic contexts. Instead, they support additive bilingualism models that view multiple languages as resources rather than obstacles to academic achievement (Cummins, 2000).

5.4. Implications for Multilingual Education Policy and Practice

The results have several important implications for Ghana's tertiary education policy and practice. At the institutional level, CoEs need more consistent and supportive policies regarding multilingual discourse that move beyond symbolic recognition to practical implementation. The institutional ambivalence identified in student interviews creates uncertainty and anxiety that undermines the potential benefits of multilingual education. Faculty development programs should address multilingual classroom management and the academic benefits of translanguaging practices. The variation in faculty responses to indigenous language use (ranging from 43% to 78% discouragement across disciplines) suggests that professional development could help create more supportive multilingual learning environments. Student support services should acknowledge the psychological dimensions of multilingual identity navigation and provide resources for students experiencing identity confusion. The finding that 32% of students scored in the high range for identity confusion indicates a substantial need for targeted support services. Curriculum design should incorporate opportunities for heritage language use and cultural knowledge integration, particularly in disciplines where such integration is feasible and pedagogically beneficial. The success of multilingual discourse in group work sessions suggests that collaborative learning formats may be particularly conducive to identity integration strategies.

5.5. Limitations and Future Research

This study had several limitations that suggest directions for future research. The cross-sectional design limited understanding of how identity confusion evolves over students' tertiary careers. Longitudinal research following students from entry to graduation would provide insight into identity development trajectories and the long-term effects of different navigation strategies. The focus on four CoEs, while providing good coverage of Ghana's higher education landscape, may not capture the full diversity of multilingual experiences across all Ghanaian tertiary institutions. Future research should include additional institutions, particularly those serving different linguistic communities and geographic regions. The study's emphasis on identity confusion, while revealing important challenges, may have underemphasized the positive aspects of multilingual identity development. Future research should

examine not only the challenges but also the cognitive, cultural, and social benefits that multilingual students bring to academic environments. Investigation of specific pedagogical approaches that successfully support multilingual identity integration would provide practical guidance for faculty and curriculum developers. Intervention studies examining the effectiveness of different multilingual education strategies in Ghanaian tertiary contexts would inform evidence-based policy development.

6. Conclusions

This study has illuminated the intricate ways in which multilingual classroom discourse shapes identity construction among tertiary students in Ghana, revealing that identity negotiation is not a peripheral concern but a central dimension of academic participation in multilingual higher education contexts. Rather than functioning simply as a medium of instruction, language emerged as a powerful social and symbolic resource through which students continually negotiate belonging, legitimacy, and self-worth within academic spaces. The findings demonstrate that identity confusion is not an individual deficit but a structurally produced experience arising from misalignments between students' lived multilingual realities and institutional language ideologies. Importantly, the study moves beyond a binary framing of English versus indigenous languages to show that students' experiences are characterized by dynamic, context-sensitive meaning-making. Students were not passively caught between languages; instead, they actively engaged in sophisticated forms of linguistic decision-making to manage competing expectations from peers, lecturers, and institutional norms. However, this agency came at a cognitive and emotional cost, particularly in environments where multilingual practices were tolerated inconsistently or implicitly discouraged. In such settings, students' linguistic resources were underutilized, and identity coherence was often sacrificed in the pursuit of perceived academic legitimacy.

The evidence further suggests that identity integration—rather than linguistic separation—offers the most sustainable pathway for both psychological well-being and academic engagement. Students who were able to draw flexibly on their full linguistic repertoires demonstrated stronger confidence, deeper conceptual understanding, and a greater sense of authenticity. Yet, the uneven distribution of institutional support meant that this integrative approach remained accessible only to a minority. This highlights a critical disconnect between policy rhetoric endorsing multilingualism and the everyday discursive practices that shape students' academic lives. By foregrounding classroom discourse as a site of identity formation, this study contributes to broader debates on multilingual education in postcolonial contexts. It challenges lingering monolingual assumptions that position indigenous languages as pedagogically inferior or academically risky, and instead provides empirical support for additive and translanguaging-oriented approaches. In doing so, the study reframes multilingualism not as a problem to be managed, but as an intellectual and cultural asset capable of enriching learning when appropriately legitimized.

Ultimately, the study underscores the need for a paradigm shift in Ghanaian tertiary education—one that recognizes linguistic diversity as foundational to inclusive pedagogy rather than peripheral to it. Creating coherent, supportive multilingual learning environments requires more than policy declarations; it demands deliberate alignment between institutional language ideologies, classroom practices, and assessment norms. Without such alignment, students will continue to shoulder the burden of identity negotiation individually, often at the expense of full academic engagement. Addressing this challenge is therefore not only a linguistic or cultural imperative, but a matter of educational equity and quality in Ghana's multilingual higher education landscape.

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AUTHORS' BIODATA

1. **Samuel Bruce Kpeglo** is a lecturer in the Department of Languages; and the head of Academic Planning & Quality Assurance Unit of St. Teresa's College of Education, Hohoe, Ghana, with considerable teaching experience in English Language pedagogy. His research interests are in language learning strategies, classroom discourse and communicative language teaching. He is a member of the West African Association of Commonwealth Literature & Language Studies (WAACLALS), a member of the Linguistics Association of Ghana (LAG) and a member of the International Association of Transformative Educators.

2. **Maxwell Seyram Kwame Kumah, PhD** is a Ghanaian academic and educational researcher in the Department of Mathematics and ICT/Computer Studies Education of St. Teresa's College of Education, Hohoe, Ghana. He specialized in Mathematics Education and Teacher Education. He serves as a Lecturer and Vice Principal of the College. His scholarly work focuses on Mathematics teaching and learning, instructional competence, assessment and feedback practices, blended learning, and teacher professional development. Dr. Kumah has published in peer-reviewed academic journals on issues relating to teaching styles, learning outcomes, and pedagogical effectiveness in colleges of education, contributing to the advancement of mathematics education and teacher training in Ghana.

3. **Ebenezer Giddi** is a lecturer in the Department of Languages at St. Teresa's College of Education, Hohoe, Ghana. He is actively involved in the training of pre-service teachers, with a focus on English language education and classroom communication. His academic interests include language pedagogy, classroom discourse, multilingual education, and teacher professional development. Through his teaching and scholarly engagement, he is committed to promoting effective language use and inclusive pedagogical practices within Ghana's multilingual educational context.