

Bilingual Pedagogy and Learner Engagement in Grammar Instruction in Rural Junior High Schools in Ghana: Implications for Language Policy Implementation

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ABSTRACT

Although Ghana's language-in-education policy mandates the exclusive use of Ghanaian languages up to Basic 3 and English-only instruction from Basic 4 upward, classroom realities in rural junior high schools reveal a striking mismatch between policy prescriptions and pedagogical practice. Despite the formal monolingual orientation of the policy, many teachers continue to draw on learners' L1 as a practical resource for explaining grammatical concepts and enhancing comprehension. Guided by Schmidt's Noticing Hypothesis, this study explored how bilingual pedagogy influences learner engagement in grammar instruction and the implications for language policy implementation in rural Ghanaian junior high schools. The study employed qualitative case study design, involving twelve purposively selected English teachers from rural schools in the Oti and Volta Regions. Data was gathered through interviews, classroom observations, and document analysis, and analyzed thematically using Braun and Clarke's framework. Findings showed that teachers employed translanguaging, code-switching, and comparative grammar explanations to foster comprehension and participation, yet these practices remain unofficial and unstable due to policy ambiguity, institutional pressure for English-only instruction, and insufficient preparation in bilingual pedagogies. The study concludes that bilingual pedagogy enhances learner engagement by promoting conscious linguistic noticing but remains hindered by unclear policy direction and lack of teacher training. It recommends operationalizing Ghana's policy to legitimize and support bilingual classroom practices.

Key Words: Bilingual Pedagogy, English-only Instruction, Language-in-Education, Introduction, Language Policy, Learner Engagement

INTRODUCTION

Language lies at the heart of education, shaping not only how learners access knowledge but also how they construct meaning and identity. In multilingual societies like Ghana, where over 80 indigenous languages coexist alongside English, bilingual pedagogy has become central to equitable and meaningful learning (Opoku-Amankwa et al., 2015; UNESCO, 2020). The effective implementation of bilingual instruction at the junior high school level is crucial, as this stage bridges basic literacy and advanced academic discourse. Yet, despite decades of advocacy for mother-tongue-based formal education, the language-in-education policy only permits the use of mother-tongue in formal instruction only at the lower primary school level. This English-only policy does not permit the many rural schools still struggle to actualize bilingual pedagogies that foster genuine learner engagement and comprehension (Ansah, 2014; Dankwa-Apawu et al., 2025).

Our observations and discussions with teachers in rural districts of Oti and Volta Regions, as well as other areas of Ghana, reveal that while teachers recognize the importance of the mother tongue in facilitating understanding and engagement, the English-only instruction policy prevents them from using other languages for instruction in multilingual Ghanaian communities. This mismatch between policy and practice undermines learner participation and conceptual understanding. Learners, particularly in rural settings where English exposure is

limited often become passive recipients rather than active participants in lessons (Anim, 2023; Opoku-Amankwa, 2009). Their disengagement is not merely linguistic but cognitive and affective, as comprehension difficulties in English inhibit classroom interaction and confidence (Yevudey, 2017).

Teacher beliefs about language use, including what languages should be used, when, and for what purposes, strongly influence their pedagogical decisions (Garcia & Lin, 2017). Those who view bilingualism as a transitional tool tend to minimize local language use, whereas teachers who embrace it as a cognitive and cultural resource adopt more flexible, translanguaging practices that scaffold understanding and engagement (Neupane, 2025; Niazi, 2022). However, Ghana's English-dominant assessment regime, English-only policy, and parental attitudes toward English as the language of success often constrain teachers' agency to fully implement bilingual strategies (Ansah & Agyeman, 2015; Bisilki, 2025). Consequently, classroom discourse frequently reflects policy rhetoric rather than pedagogical reality.

In this context, exploring how bilingual pedagogy intersects with learner engagement is essential to understanding the deeper implications of Ghana's language-in-education policy. The present study argues that bilingual instruction should not merely be seen as a medium choice but as a pedagogical strategy that enables learners to notice linguistic forms, negotiate meaning, and develop metalinguistic awareness through interaction in both languages. Therefore, this study seeks to uncover how teachers conceptualize and practice bilingual pedagogy in rural junior high schools and how such practices shape learner engagement in multilingual classrooms.

Statement of the Problem

Despite Ghana's long-standing language-in-education policy, actual classroom practices in some junior high school in rural communities remain inconsistent with policy intentions. The official language-in-education policy mandates the use of Ghanaian languages as mediums of instruction in the early years, with a transition to English-only by upper primary and beyond. However, in rural junior high schools, teachers often struggle to implement the English-only policy meaningfully (Ansah, 2014; Bretuo, 2021). Classroom observations and empirical studies suggest that some teachers resort to unofficial and policy-inconsistent uses of L1, often through brief code-switching, translation, or comparative grammar explanations (Adawu & Bintul, 2025; Yevudey, 2017). However, these L1 insertions are typically sporadic, improvised, and pedagogically unstructured, reflecting teachers' attempts to navigate the limitations imposed by the policy rather than deliberate bilingual instructional design (Ansah & Agyeman, 2015). As a result, the use of L1 in junior high schools operates as a survival strategy rather than a recognized pedagogical tool.

The problem, therefore, is not only one of language choice but of pedagogical enactment and learner participation. Learners in these contexts are frequently disengaged from classroom discourse because instruction in English-only exceeds their comprehension threshold, while local language use is stigmatized or underutilized. Thus, the potential instructional benefits of complementary L1 use within English-medium classrooms remain largely unactualized in practice (Macaro et al., 2020).

Previous research (e.g., Anim, 2023; Ansah & Agyeman, 2015; Owoo, 2024) has emphasized the policy-practice gap, yet little is known about how bilingual pedagogies influence learner engagement and how teachers' beliefs and classroom realities mediate this relationship.

A systematic investigation into teachers' bilingual pedagogical practices and their impact on engagement is therefore timely. Without such understanding, language policy implementation risks remaining a struggle since it is codified in documents but disconnected from learners' linguistic realities and teachers' instructional challenges.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to examine how bilingual pedagogy influences learner engagement in grammar instruction in selected rural junior high schools in Ghana and to explore the implications of these practices for effective language policy implementation.

Research Questions

The study addressed the following research questions:

How do bilingual pedagogical practices influence learner engagement in English grammar instruction?

What implications may these bilingual pedagogical practices have for language policy implementation in rural junior high schools in Ghana?

Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in Schmidt's (1990) Noticing Hypothesis, which posits that conscious awareness of linguistic input "noticing" is a necessary condition for language learning. According to Schmidt, learners must first notice specific language forms and functions in input before these can become intake and be internalized for use. The theory thus bridges cognition and pedagogy, emphasizing that instruction must create opportunities for learners to attend consciously to language in meaningful contexts (Ellis, 2015; Leow, 2018).

In the context of bilingual pedagogical practices, the Noticing Hypothesis underscores the role of language alternation (e.g., translanguaging, code-switching) as a cognitive tool that enables learners to compare linguistic systems, clarify meaning, and make form-function connections (Cenoz & Gorter, 2021). When teachers deliberately draw learners' attention to correspondences between English and Ghanaian languages, they facilitate metalinguistic awareness (Agbozo, 2015; Kwaukumey, 2023). Conversely, monolingual English instruction in linguistically complex classrooms limits opportunities for noticing and constrains engagement, as learners struggle to connect new input with existing linguistic knowledge (Wei & Garcia, 2022).

Within rural Ghanaian classrooms, Schmidt's hypothesis provides a useful analytical lens for examining how bilingual instruction mediates attention, understanding, and participation. Teachers' strategic use of the mother tongue can help learners notice the gap between their current linguistic competence and target forms in English, thereby deepening engagement through active meaning negotiation. This framework also enables the researchers to interrogate how teachers' beliefs, knowledge, and contextual realities shape the use of bilingual techniques that promote noticing. Ultimately, by situating bilingual pedagogy within the Noticing Hypothesis, this study views learner engagement not as passive participation but as an active cognitive process in which awareness, interaction, and bilingual mediation converge to support effective language learning and policy realization.

Conceptualizing Bilingual Pedagogy in Multilingual Contexts

In attempting to conceptualize bilingual pedagogy within multilingual spaces such as Ghana, it becomes evident that scholarship has gradually shifted from viewing bilingualism as a remedial linguistic strategy to recognizing it as an epistemic resource. While García and Lin (2017) and Liu and Fang (2018) foreground bilingual pedagogy as deliberate instructional use of two languages to scaffold learning, the critical question is how such conceptual frames translate into classroom practice where power, ideology, and assessment pressures intersect. The earlier deficit-based belief that indigenous languages merely "support" eventual English mastery is increasingly challenged by scholars like Cummins (2021), who argues that bilingualism strengthens cognitive processes necessary for academic performance. However, the persistent dominance of English-only policy in most of education in Ghanaian schools suggests that Cummins's theoretical ideal is seldom realized in practice.

Contemporary discussions on translanguaging, championed by Canagarajah (2020) and Wei and García (2021), further expand bilingual pedagogy into a flexible repertoire-based practice that empowers learners to mobilize all linguistic resources for meaning-making. Yet, a critical tension emerges: although translanguaging promises learner agency, Ghanaian classrooms often remain constrained by monolingual ideologies that privilege English as the sole marker of progress and modernity (Agyekum, 2018). This ideological imbalance restricts teachers' agency, compelling many to adopt bilingual strategies informally rather than as intentional pedagogical practices (Adika, 2012). Adika's (2012) work, which draws on qualitative classroom observations in Ghanaian basic schools, highlights that teachers' bilingual practices are largely ad hoc, serving translation rather than conceptual development.

From a constructivist standpoint, Opoku-Amankwa et al. (2015) and UNESCO (2021) demonstrate that learners build deeper understanding when instruction activates prior linguistic knowledge. Their findings, based on empirical classroom-based research in Ghana and cross-national comparative analyses, reveal that bilingual scaffolding promotes conceptual clarity, especially in literacy-related tasks. Nonetheless, this potential remains limited by rigid curriculum structures that prioritize content coverage and examination performance over dialogic interaction (Yevudey, 2017). Yevudey's (2017) ethnographic study in rural Ghanaian classrooms found that teachers' attempts at bilingual engagement were often curtailed by curriculum pacing demands and inadequate institutional support. Thus, the conceptualization of bilingual pedagogy in this study moves beyond describing language alternation to interrogating how sociolinguistic hierarchies and curriculum pressures shape the legitimacy and enactment of bilingual teaching.

Teachers' Beliefs and Knowledge about Bilingual Instruction

Teachers' beliefs form a critical mediating layer between policy expectations and actual classroom practices. Borg (2015) rightly argues that teacher cognition exerts a stronger influence on instructional decisions than prescriptive policy documents. This claim is evident in Ghanaian research, where teachers often express ambivalence toward using local languages for instruction. Asare (2022), through a mixed-methods study involving surveys and lesson observations across four Ghanaian regions, found that teachers acknowledged the usefulness of bilingual support but remained reluctant to adopt it systematically due to examination-driven pressures. Bretuo (2021), in a qualitative case study conducted in rural Ghana, similarly notes that teachers interpret bilingualism as potentially beneficial but not aligned with the assessment culture that privileges English-only performance.

A persistent issue is the inadequate preparation of teachers for bilingual pedagogy. Yakubu (2020), drawing on interviews with teacher educators and pre-service teachers in Northern Ghana, explains that teacher training programs prioritize English proficiency but neglect strategies for integrating Ghanaian languages into instruction. This structural omission leaves teachers theoretically aware of bilingual benefits but practically underprepared, echoing Adika's (2012) earlier findings that many teachers lack the discourse management skills needed to facilitate bilingual classroom interactions.

Moreover, teachers' beliefs are not formed in isolation; they are embedded within broader socio-political and institutional structures. Bamgbose (2000) illustrates, through a pan-African policy analysis, that English dominance persists because societal attitudes equate English with opportunity and upward mobility. Bretuo's (2021) observations affirm that such ideologies trickle down into rural classrooms, shaping teachers' reluctance to employ bilingual strategies even when evidence supports their effectiveness. However, comparative work by Heugh and Mohamed (2020) and Plüddemann (2018), based on empirical studies in South Africa and multilingual African contexts, demonstrates that sustained professional development and policy alignment can shift teacher beliefs, enabling more consistent bilingual practice. These studies collectively suggest that without institutional reinforcement, teacher awareness alone is insufficient for meaningful pedagogical transformation.

Bilingual Pedagogy and Learner Engagement

Learner engagement is widely acknowledged as central to effective bilingual pedagogy, yet its realization depends on how teachers mediate linguistic access. Wei and García (2022) argue that when learners can draw freely on their linguistic repertoires, they demonstrate increased confidence and deeper comprehension. Their work, grounded in classroom-based qualitative analyses, highlights the cognitive and affective benefits of translanguaging. In Ghana, however, rural learners often internalize classroom silence and disengagement as a response to English-only instruction (Yevudey, 2017). Yevudey's (2017) ethnography found that learners participated more actively when allowed to discuss tasks in local languages before responding in English.

Empirical studies conducted in Ghana provide further support. Opoku-Amankwa et al. (2015), using mixed methods across urban and rural basic schools, found that bilingual group discussions fostered equitable participation and enhanced comprehension. Bronteng (2018), through classroom discourse analysis in junior high schools, similarly concluded that translanguaging promoted conceptual understanding by enabling learners to connect new content to familiar linguistic frames. Yet, these positive outcomes depend heavily on teachers'

willingness to legitimize learners' linguistic resources. Asare (2022) warns that monolingual classroom norms silence learners who lack proficiency in English, reducing engagement to superficial repetition rather than genuine meaning-making.

Cognitively, Ellis (2015) and Loewen (2020) argue that bilingual engagement enhances metalinguistic awareness because it draws learners' attention to linguistic contrasts across languages. These conceptual insights resonate with observed classroom outcomes: bilingual engagement is not merely behavioral but fundamentally cognitive. However, policy environments often fail to support these practices. UNESCO (2020) underscores that without appropriate materials, teacher training, and assessment models that value bilingual participation, learner engagement remains fragile. Thus, engagement becomes both a pedagogical indicator and a policy barometer, revealing the extent to which bilingual ideals translate into classroom realities.

Language Policy Implementation and the Rural Classroom Context

Language policy in Ghana has historically oscillated between promoting local languages and entrenching English as the *de facto* instructional medium (Klu & Asare, 2018). The 2019 Standard-Based curriculum's language-in-education policy, for instance, mandates the predominant use of Ghanaian languages at the lower primary level and a transition to English-only instruction from upper primary onwards (Asare, 2022; Odoom, 2025). Odoom (2025), in a policy-implementation study using document analysis and interviews with district education officers, highlights that while policy texts advocate bilingual instruction, schools lack resources and supervisory structures to enforce these provisions. Rural schools are most affected: they experience acute shortages of bilingual materials, limited teacher training, and diverse linguistic populations that complicate the selection of a dominant local language (Adika, 2012; Yevudey, 2017).

These realities reflect what Ricento (2015) terms the "politics of practicality," where policy ideals yield to systemic constraints. Laviosa and Davies (2020), in their comparative analysis of sub-Saharan language-in-education reforms, argue that top-down policy approaches frequently overlook the lived complexities of rural classrooms. Their critique aligns with Ghanaian evidence showing that teachers at the junior high schools usually abandon bilingual education since the English-only policy does not permit its usage (Asare, 2022; Yevudey, 2017). In this case, teachers are out of sync with assessment standards, resource availability, and community expectations.

Yet, despite policy ambiguities, teachers in rural settings often innovate. Yevudey (2017) documents how some rural teachers create informal translanguaging spaces, such as bilingual group discussions and storytelling sessions, to enhance participation. These context-responsive strategies demonstrate teacher agency in navigating competing curricular and linguistic demands. Nonetheless, they remain informal adaptations rather than institutionalized practice, highlighting a significant policy-practice gap. By positioning rural classrooms as critical sites where bilingual pedagogy is enacted, negotiated, or resisted, this study foregrounds the complex interplay of teacher agency, learner engagement, and policy structure in shaping language education in multilingual Ghana.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a qualitative research approach to explore how bilingual pedagogy influences learner engagement in rural junior high schools in Ghana. We found the qualitative research approach most appropriate because it facilitates a close interrogation of the social, linguistic, and pedagogical realities that unfold naturally within classrooms. As Creswell and Poth (2016) assert, qualitative inquiry privileges depth and meaning, enabling the researcher to capture lived experiences in ways that quantitative approaches often cannot. Qualitative inquiry enables a deep exploration of the fluid negotiations, power dynamics, and belief systems that shape teachers' language practices. Given that our interest lay in understanding how bilingual pedagogy influences learner engagement in grammar instruction and its possible implications for policy implementation, a qualitative stance offered the interpretive flexibility required for this investigation.

A case study design was employed to examine bilingual pedagogy and learner engagement across selected rural junior high schools. Following Yin (2018), we viewed case study methodology as appropriate where contextual

conditions are inseparable from the phenomenon. Each selected school was treated as a bounded case, allowing for careful comparison of how sociolinguistic realities shape pedagogical decisions. This approach aligned with the interpretivist orientation of the study, which, as Tisdell et al. (2025) maintain, seeks to enlighten processes and meanings rather than to generalize across populations.

The study was conducted across ten junior high schools in some rural communities in the Oti and Volta Regions of Ghana, contexts where bilingual pedagogy is both most urgent and most constrained. These sociocultural contexts present linguistic diversities. The dominant languages spoken in these research contexts include Ewe, Konkomba, Nchumuru, Krachi, among others. Through purposive sampling, twelve English language teachers were selected based on their involvement in grammar and literacy teaching and their experience working with linguistically diverse learners. This sampling approach ensured that participants could articulate informed reflections on their pedagogical reasoning and the challenges of balancing English and local language use.

Data was developed through semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, and document analysis. The semi-structured interviews elicited teachers' beliefs, motivations, and interpretations of bilingual instruction, while observations enabled us to witness spontaneous bilingual practices and learner engagement patterns that might otherwise remain unnoticed. Document analysis provided additional contextual grounding and allowed cross-validation of teacher accounts.

Data analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2019) six-phase thematic analysis, a systematic yet flexible approach that enabled the researchers to move from raw textual data to patterned meanings grounded in teachers' lived experiences. The analysis began with familiarization, during which the researchers repeatedly read interview transcripts, observation notes, and document records while taking reflexive notes on emerging ideas. In the second phase, initial codes were generated manually, capturing meaningful features such as "use of L1 to clarify grammar," "policy uncertainty," and "learner confusion during English-only instruction." The third phase involved searching for themes, where related codes were clustered into broader categories, such as bilingual pedagogy as a cognitive scaffold, ambivalence due to policy pressure and fear of being judged, and pragmatic orientation to bilingual use.

During the fourth phase, the themes were reviewed, checked against the coded extracts and the entire data corpus, and refined by collapsing overlapping categories and removing weak or unsupported patterns. In the fifth phase, themes were defined and named, ensuring that each theme captured a coherent story. For example, the theme "Teachers' Beliefs about Bilingual Pedagogy and Learner Engagement" was sharpened to reflect teachers' deliberate use of Ghanaian languages to support comprehension rather than simple translation. Finally, in the sixth phase, the findings were written up, weaving together analytic claims with vivid excerpts from the data to produce an interpretation that was both empirically grounded and theoretically informed. This iterative process ensured analytical rigor and allowed the researcher's interpretive voice to remain present throughout the analysis.

To improve analytic transparency, coding was conducted in iterative cycles, beginning with open inductive coding to capture emerging patterns and followed by deductive coding guided by Schmidt's (1990) Noticing Hypothesis. Rather than relying solely on researcher intuition, we maintained an audit trail that documented coding decisions, category refinements, and analytic reflections. To enhance coding reliability, 20% of the data was independently reviewed by a peer qualitative researcher, and areas of divergence were reconciled through discussion to ensure interpretive consistency.

Multiple strategies were integrated to enhance the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings. Triangulation across interviews, observations, and documents allowed convergence of evidence and helped mitigate single-source bias. Member checking was conducted by sharing preliminary themes with six participating teachers. This enabled them to verify the accuracy of interpretations and challenge any misrepresentations of their perspectives. In one instance, a teacher questioned the initial theme that suggested teachers "rarely" used L1; she clarified that although policy restrictions limited explicit use, brief explanatory code-switching occurred regularly during the teaching of difficult grammatical structures, prompting a refinement of the theme to capture this nuance. We also kept a reflexive journal throughout fieldwork, documenting how our positionality influenced data interpretation. Consistent with Lincoln and Guba's (1985) principles, engagement in schools helped to build rapport and produce more authentic, context-sensitive insights.

LIMITATION OF THE STUDY

Although the qualitative case study design generated rich, context-specific insights, the sample size may restrict its generalizability. The reliance on self-reported data in interviews may have introduced selective recall or social desirability bias. Despite triangulation, classroom observations were limited to specific periods (two lessons of each teacher) and may not fully capture teachers' wider bilingual practices. Additionally, the study's focus on English teachers excluded other subject teachers whose perspectives may enrich understanding.

RESULTS

This section presents the results of the study on how bilingual pedagogy influences learner engagement in selected rural junior high schools in Ghana and the implications for language policy implementation. The analysis is guided by Schmidt's (1990) Noticing Hypothesis, which posits that conscious awareness of linguistic input—"noticing"—is a prerequisite for language acquisition. In this theoretical framing, learner engagement is viewed as an active cognitive process in which bilingual practices (such as translanguaging and code-switching) help students attend to, compare, and internalize linguistic forms and meanings

To provide a coherent overview of the major insights that emerged from the data, Table 1 presents a thematic summary map that consolidates the findings generated through Braun and Clarke's (2019) six-phase thematic analysis. The table is organized to guide the reader through the logical progression of themes, beginning with teachers' underlying beliefs about bilingual pedagogy, moving through the actual classroom enactment of these practices, and ending with the broader pedagogical implications for language policy implementation in rural junior high schools.

Each theme is broken down into sub-themes that highlight patterns across interviews, classroom observations, and document analysis. The table also integrates brief summaries of findings, identifies the sources of evidence supporting each pattern, and includes illustrative excerpts or observed behaviors that ground each theme in the lived realities of teachers and learners. In this way, the table functions as a visual synthesis of the analytical narrative, enabling readers to engage with the thematic structure of the study while appreciating how bilingual strategies shape learner engagement in multilingual rural classrooms.

Table 1 Thematic Summary Table (Thematic Map)

How Bilingual Pedagogy Influences Learner Engagement in Rural JHS Classrooms in Ghana

Main Theme	Sub-Themes	Summary of Findings	Source of Evidence	Illustrative Excerpts / Observed Behaviours
1. Teachers' Beliefs about Bilingual Pedagogy and Learner Engagement	1.1 Bilingual pedagogy as a cognitive scaffold	Most teachers believe bilingual instruction improves comprehension and encourages participation. They view L1 as a bridge to meaning and a tool that helps learners "notice" linguistic patterns.	Interview Data	Teacher 03: "When I speak English alone, some of them just stare at me. But when I explain it in Ewe or Nchumuru, you see their faces light up, and then they begin to respond."
	1.2 Ambivalence due to policy pressure and fear of being judged	Some teachers hesitate to use L1 because they fear administrative disapproval or perceive bilingual teaching as "unprofessional" or "lazy."	Interview Data	Teacher 07: "The headteacher sometimes warns us not to use the local language too much... So I only use it when I have no choice."

	1.3 Pragmatic orientation to bilingual use	Teachers balance their beliefs with perceived policy expectations, leading to inconsistent implementation and limited sustained noticing opportunities.	Researcher Interpretation; Interview Data	Teachers expressed uncertainty about “how much L1 is allowed,” despite its clear benefits for comprehension.
2. Classroom Enactment of Bilingual Practices and Opportunities for Noticing	2.1 Translational bilingualism (surface comprehension)	Teachers translate key vocabulary and instructions. This aids understanding but leads to mechanical participation and minimal metalinguistic awareness.	Classroom Observation	Observation Note: “Students were able to give correct forms but could not explain why. Engagement appeared mechanical.”
	2.2 Interactive translanguaging (deep noticing and engagement)	Teachers fluidly alternate between languages, prompting learners to compare structures across languages. This leads to heightened noticing and meaningful participation.	Classroom Observation	Teacher 05 (during lesson): “In English, we say He goes, but in Ewe we don’t add -s. So why do we add -s in English?” Student A: “Because English verbs change with the person.”
	2.3 Monolingual dominance (limited engagement)	English-only instruction results in low participation, confusion, and minimal noticing. Teachers follow policy expectations at the expense of comprehension.	Classroom Observation; Interview Data	Observation Note: “Many students remained silent... teacher repeated explanations without switching.” Teacher 09: “Sometimes I see they don’t understand, but I keep using English because that’s what the syllabus expects.”
3. Pedagogical Implications for Language Policy Implementation in Rural Schools	3.1 Policy–practice contradictions	Policy promotes mother-tongue support, yet JHS textbooks, exams, and supervision remain fully English-based. Teachers receive conflicting messages from school leaders.	Document Analysis; Interview Data	Teacher 11: “We are told to use the local language... but the textbooks, exams, and supervision are all in English. It’s confusing.”
	3.2 Teacher improvisation despite system constraints	Teachers use localized bilingual strategies (group discussions, bilingual summaries, L1 collaborative work) to compensate for resource gaps.	Classroom Observation; Interview Data	Teacher 04: “When they discuss in their language first, they understand better. Then when I ask them to say it in English, they are more confident.”
	3.3 Lack of institutional support for bilingual pedagogy	Approved lesson notes are entirely in English; no policy documents provide operational guidance for bilingual teaching at the JHS level.	Document Analysis	Document review: No official materials referenced bilingual practice beyond the early primary level.

Table 1 above provides a structured summary of the core themes that emerged from the data analysis. It organizes the findings into major thematic categories, each supported by specific sub-themes and representative participant evidence. The structure demonstrates how raw data was condensed, grouped, and interpreted to generate coherent analytical themes aligned with the research questions. Overall, the table functions as a visual synthesis of patterns in the dataset, showing clear links between participant experiences, recurrent issues, and the broader conceptual themes developed during the coding process.

Data from semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, and document analysis were analyzed thematically. Three key themes emerged:

Teachers' beliefs about bilingual pedagogy and learner engagement.

Classroom enactment of bilingual practices and opportunities for noticing.

Pedagogical implications for language policy implementation in rural schools.

Teachers' Beliefs about Bilingual Pedagogy and Learner Engagement

Analysis of interview data revealed that most teachers viewed bilingual pedagogy as a practical tool for facilitating comprehension and participation, especially in linguistically diverse classrooms. Teachers frequently justified their use of Ghanaian languages as a bridge to meaning rather than as an alternative medium of instruction. As Teacher 03 explained:

"When I speak English alone, some of them just stare at me. But when I explain it in Ewe or Nchumuru, you see their faces light up, and then they begin to respond Teacher 12 also noted:

"If I introduce a grammar lesson using only English, most of the students go quiet. But immediately I switch to Konkomba to clarify a point, they start nodding and smiling, and even start asking questions. You can literally see their confidence come back."

This belief aligns with Schmidt's argument that noticing arises from meaningful input—learners must understand what they hear in order to attend consciously to form. Teachers therefore perceived the use of the local language as a cognitive scaffold, enabling students to grasp English structures through comparative understanding.

However, a smaller group of teachers expressed ambivalence toward bilingual pedagogy, citing policy ambiguity and fear of being perceived as "lazy." As Teacher 07 remarked:

"The headteacher sometimes warns us not to use the local language too much. They say we must help pupils improve their English. So I only use it when I have no choice."

Such comments illustrate the policy-practice tension identified in the problem statement: teachers operate within conflicting expectations since the policy frowns on local language use, yet learners in rural communities sometimes do not understand some concepts teachers explain in English. This contradiction constrains teachers' confidence to deploy bilingual methods strategically, even when pedagogically justified.

From the researchers' perspective, these beliefs reveal a pragmatic orientation toward bilingual pedagogy: teachers value it as a tool for learner engagement but remain uncertain about its legitimacy within the policy framework. This uncertainty partially undermines the conditions for systematic noticing, as teachers' inconsistent language choices may limit sustained learner attention to cross-linguistic features.

Classroom Enactment of Bilingual Practices and Opportunities for Noticing

Observation data revealed three dominant classroom practices related to bilingual instruction:

(1) Translational bilingualism,

(2) Interactive translanguaging, and

(3) Monolingual dominance with minimal L1 support

In translational bilingualism, teachers used the local language primarily to translate difficult vocabulary or instructions. For instance, in Teacher 02's grammar lesson on simple past tense, the instruction "Change the verb into its past form."

Learners repeated the examples but showed minimal participation beyond choral repetition. Observation notes recorded: "Students were able to give correct forms but could not explain why. Engagement appeared mechanical."

This pattern reflects what Schmidt (1990) describes as input without conscious noticing, indicating how learners perceive linguistic forms but do not process them deeply. Translational bilingualism therefore supports surface comprehension but not metalinguistic awareness.

In contrast, interactive translanguaging fostered richer learner engagement. In Teacher 05's class, while teaching subject-verb agreement, the teacher alternated fluidly between English and Ewe:

Teacher: "In English, we say He goes, but in Ewe we don't add -s. So why do we add -s in English?"

Student A: "Because English verbs change with the person."

Teacher: "Exactly! You have noticed something important."

In teacher 09's class, while teaching phrases, the teacher also alternated fluidly between English and Konkomba:

Teacher: "In English language, we add -s to some plural nouns but in Konkomba the form changes. Why do you think those changes do not occur in English language?"

Student C: "Some English nouns are regular whilst others are irregular."

Teacher: "That's correct! You have noticed it very well."

Here, the teacher explicitly prompted cross-linguistic comparison, leading students to verbalize grammatical reasoning. Observation notes described the atmosphere as "interactive and participatory," with several learners contributing examples from both languages. This exemplifies Schmidt's Noticing Hypothesis in action because learners consciously attended to linguistic differences, bridging comprehension and form-focused awareness

Finally, classrooms dominated by monolingual English instruction exhibited low engagement and limited noticing opportunities. In Teacher 09's observed class, English-only explanations led to visible disengagement:

Teacher 09 admitted:

"Sometimes I see they don't understand, but I keep using English because that's what the syllabus expects."

Observation note: "Many students remained silent, some looking confused; teacher repeated explanations without switching or simplifying."

This finding underscores the cognitive and affective costs of rigid monolingualism in multilingual settings since students cannot notice or internalize linguistic input they do not understand. Within Schmidt's framework, such instruction restricts learners' capacity to transform input into intake, thus weakening engagement and retention.

From the researcher's interpretation, effective bilingual pedagogy occurs not merely when two languages are used, but when their interplay creates moments of metalinguistic reflection. These findings suggest that learner engagement is highest when bilingual practices are intentional, dialogic, and cognitively contrastive, rather than purely translational.

Pedagogical Implications for Language Policy Implementation

Teachers' bilingual practices revealed a clear policy-practice gap between language policy intentions and classroom realities. Although Ghana's language-in-education policy mandates the use of the mother-tongue for instruction only at the lower primary level, it requires English-only instruction from upper primary throughout junior high school. Consequently, no explicit guidelines exist to support bilingual mother-tongue-assisted instruction at the junior high level. As Teacher 11 lamented:

"Even though we are not permitted to use the local language in teaching, we use it to help learners. Because it is not acceptable here, we do not have the materials to compliment what we do."

Document analysis confirmed this as no official documents provided guidance on how teachers at the junior high school level might incorporate Ghanaian languages pedagogically. This policy gap reinforces what Adika (2012) describes as "policy inertia", a situation in which policy dictates exists, but their practical implications for classroom instructions remain undefined and unsupported.

Nevertheless, the study found that teachers' improvisational bilingual practices, though informal, often enhanced learner engagement and conceptual understanding. At one observed school in Nkwanta North, Teacher 04 used bilingual group discussions during a reading comprehension lesson. Students summarized the passage in their mother tongue before presenting key ideas in English. The teacher explained:

"When they first explain the grammar rules in their own language, they grasp the concept more clearly. Then when I ask them to express the same rules in English, they apply the grammar with more confidence"

This mirrors Schmidt's (1990) argument that awareness is heightened when learners reprocess input through multiple linguistic codes. These linguistic codes (multiple language use) served as a mediational tool linking comprehension (L1) and production (L2), thereby fulfilling both cognitive and affective dimensions of engagement.

From the researchers' standpoint, these findings highlight the disconnect between macro-level policy and micro-level practice. While teachers' localized bilingual innovations promote engagement and noticing, the absence of institutional recognition and pedagogical support limits sustainability. Effective policy implementation therefore requires reframing bilingual pedagogy not as remedial translation but as an evidence-based strategy for fostering conscious language learning.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The findings of this study reveal that bilingual pedagogical practices significantly enhance learner engagement in rural Ghanaian junior high schools by creating opportunities for conscious noticing of linguistic forms and meanings. This section discusses the findings in relation to Schmidt's (1990) Noticing Hypothesis, previous empirical studies, and the broader sociolinguistic and policy context of English language teaching in Ghana.

Bilingual Pedagogy and Learner Engagement

The study demonstrated that learners engaged more actively when teachers used bilingual strategies such as translanguaging, code-switching, and comparative grammar explanations. This observation supports Schmidt's (1990) contention that language acquisition depends on the learner's conscious awareness of linguistic input. By mediating between English and the local language, teachers enabled learners to draw explicit attention to form-function relationships, thereby transforming input into intake.

These findings are consistent with Mateus (2014), who found that bilingual instruction enhances comprehension, confidence, and metalinguistic awareness among second-language learners. Similarly, Yevudey (2017) reported that in Ghanaian classrooms, strategic use of local languages facilitates deeper conceptual understanding and learner participation, particularly in resource-constrained rural schools. The present study adds to this discourse by illustrating how these bilingual practices directly stimulate noticing.

Furthermore, the study's finding that interactive translanguaging fosters higher engagement than literal translation corroborates Canagarajah's (2011) argument that translanguaging is not simply a communicative convenience but a pedagogical strategy that develops linguistic reflexivity. Translanguaging, in this context, is a core component of bilingual pedagogy, which enables teachers to leverage learners' first language (L1) alongside English (L2) to scaffold understanding, facilitate noticing and bridge comprehension gaps. When learners compare and contrast linguistic systems, they are better able to recognize grammatical patterns, as shown in this study's observed lessons on tense and subject-verb agreement. Thus, bilingual pedagogy in rural Ghanaian classrooms operates as a cognitive bridge, connecting comprehension and grammatical awareness through purposeful language alternation

Policy Constraint and Classroom Practice

The data also revealed that teachers' beliefs and practices are shaped by a policy-practice tension. While national policy permits the use of Ghanaian languages for instruction only in the lower primary level, it mandates English-only instruction from basic 4 onwards, creating ambiguity for teachers at junior high school level (Adika, 2012). Teachers in this study expressed uncertainty about the legitimacy of bilingual practices beyond the lower primary level, often citing fear of administrative sanctions. This mirrors the findings of Henderson (2017), who observed that unclear policy directives and inconsistent supervision discourage teachers from fully integrating bilingual methods even when pedagogically beneficial.

Within Schmidt's (1990) theoretical lens, such policy ambiguity restricts conditions for sustained noticing. When teachers oscillate between monolingual and bilingual instruction due to institutional pressure, learners experience fragmented linguistic exposure, limiting their ability to consciously process form-function connections. Consequently, the study underscores the need for a coherent policy framework that explicitly endorses bilingual pedagogies as tools for cognitive engagement and language learning rather than as compensatory strategies for linguistic weakness.

Teachers' Professional Agency and Contextual Adaptation

A notable insight from the study is teachers' remarkable pedagogical creativity in navigating resource constraints. Despite inadequate materials and lack of formal training in bilingual methods, teachers devised improvisational strategies to facilitate noticing. This aligns with Adawu and Bintul (2025) and Schwartz et al. (2019), who argue that teachers in low-resource settings exercise professional agency by adapting instruction to contextual realities.

The findings also resonate with Johnson (2019) and Octika (2024), who maintain that effective bilingual teaching depends less on the quantity of resources and more on teachers' ability to scaffold learning through meaningful interaction. In this study, teachers' bilingual scaffolding helped learners connect new English forms to familiar linguistic structures in their first language, thereby reinforcing noticing and retention.

These results suggest that empowering teachers through targeted professional development could amplify the cognitive and motivational benefits of bilingual pedagogy. Training programs that focus on cross-linguistic comparison and the emphasis that language alternation is deliberate for learning purposes. This would help teachers move beyond spontaneous code-switching toward more systematic noticing-oriented instruction.

Theoretical and Pedagogical Implications

Theoretically, the study extends Schmidt's (1990) Noticing Hypothesis by illustrating how noticing operates within bilingual rather than monolingual learning environments. The data show that noticing is not confined to the perception of isolated English forms but occurs dynamically across languages as learners compare meanings, structures, and functions. This aligns with Vaghela (2024) and Tuimebayeva et al. (2020), who argue that multilingual awareness fosters deeper cognitive processing and promotes sustainable L2 development.

Pedagogically, the findings suggest that bilingual practices should be institutionalized rather than improvised. Teachers' spontaneous alternations between languages are valuable but insufficient without deliberate planning and reflection. Systematic bilingual strategies, such as guided contrastive tasks, bilingual glossaries, and

metalinguistic reflection activities, can transform bilingual classrooms into noticing-rich environments. Moreover, curriculum designers and policymakers must view bilingual pedagogy as a legitimate component of grammar and language instruction, especially in junior high schools rural contexts.

Finally, from a sociolinguistic perspective, the study reinforces the need to reframe bilingualism as an asset rather than a barrier in Ghanaian education. As Owoo (2024), Agbozo (2015) and Chen (2020) note that learners' local languages embody rich cognitive and cultural capital that can enhance English learning when pedagogically harnessed. The present study confirms that when teachers leverage bilingualism purposefully, learners not only engage more deeply but also internalize grammatical rules more effectively.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that bilingual pedagogy enhances learner engagement by activating metalinguistic noticing. Teachers' alternation between English and Ghanaian languages in the selected classrooms allowed learners to connect meaning, form, and function, deepening both understanding and participation in grammar instruction. However, the persistence of monolingual instructional norms undermines these gains since there is lack of policy on bilingual pedagogy in English education.

Theoretically, the findings affirm Schmidt's (1990) claim that awareness mediates acquisition. Pedagogically, they underscore the need for teacher training that emphasizes intentional bilingual strategies as cognitive scaffolds for language learning. Policy-wise, Ghana's language-in-education framework must move beyond declarative statements toward context-responsive implementation models that legitimize and support bilingual classroom practices in rural schools. Overall, implementing bilingual pedagogical practices in English education stands to enhance learners' comprehension, grammatical awareness, and active participation, which fosters more meaningful and equitable language learning outcomes. It also empowers teachers to bridge policy and practice effectively, ultimately contributing to improved academic performance and language confidence in multilingual classroom contexts.

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