Canadian Journal of Educational and Social Studies
Vol. 6(5), 2026, pp.221-238

The Relationship between Academic Language Development and Identity Construction: The Case of a Ghanaian Senior High School

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DOI: 10.53103/cjess.v6i5.577

Abstract

In Ghana, SHS is the educational level at which students encounter a marked tightening of expectations around English use and a rapid increase in demand for subject-specific academic vocabulary. Academic language denotes the vocabulary, sentence patterns, and reasoning conventions that schooling and examinations require. This study examined how age-related progression through the three SHS levels (i.e., SHS 1, SHS 2, and SHS 3) shapes students' use of academic language and how the acquisition of that register becomes intertwined with the construction of students' identities as learners. Using a qualitative, ethnographically informed design, the study collected data through classroom observation, semi-structured interviews, and analysis of written work with SHS students across SHS 1 to SHS 3 and their teachers at a selected SHS in Ghana. The study's results showed that most SHS 3 students have moved from the practice of using code-switching to using a deliberate formal English language. Thus, students' perceptions of themselves as learners changed. SHS students were compelled to accustom themselves to the official way of speaking at that level, while rejecting the old style of communicating at the JHS level. The study also revealed that students were coerced to have a command of academic English by forces emanating from peers, teachers, and pressure to attract the 'serious student tag.' The study's conclusion shows that academic language is not just about imbibing and acquisition; rather, it is continuously developed over time with maturity within Ghana's complex linguistic setting, where English, the official and formal language, occupies a controlling role with other Ghanaian languages playing a significant role in commonplace communication outside the formal context.

Keywords: Academic Language, Language Socialization, Linguistic Capital, Code Switching, Learner Identity, Multilingualism, Ghanaian Senior High Schools

Introduction

In Ghana, Senior High Schools function as multifaceted multilingual settings where students progressively advance the language activities needed for academic achievement as they build their identities as high school learners (Agbozo & Rescue, 2020). Even though Ghana has a rich linguistic diversity, English is the main language of formal education, which plays various functions in examinations, thesis writing, school communication, and official teaching and learning (Owu-Ewie, 2006; Edu-Buandoh & Otchere, 2012). This situation puts SHS students in a position where they are torn between maintaining the official language enforced by school authorities and using the daily indigenous languages they acquired from their various abodes and communities (Agbozo & Rescue, 2020). The process of becoming proficient in academic language during SHS is therefore not only a linguistic journey but also a social process through which students learn what it means to become recognized as successful students within the Ghanaian educational system (Agbozo & Rescue, 2020; Adzahlie-Mensah & Dunne, 2018).

Academic language refers to the specialized ways of using language required for engaging with formal schooling, including subject-specific vocabulary, complex sentence structures, abstract expressions, explanation, argumentation, and formal writing conventions (Cummins, 2000; Halliday, 1978). Unlike conversational language, which young people often acquire naturally through interaction with family and peers, academic language develops gradually through classroom participation, reading, writing activities, assessment practices, and interaction with teachers (Cummins, 2000). Senior High School represents a pivotal stage in this development, since it is here that students first encounter sustained pressure to move away from the freer, more mixed language habits tolerated at the Junior High School (JHS) level (Edu-Buandoh & Otchere, 2012) and toward the more formal, examination-oriented register that the West African Senior School Certificate Examination (WASSCE) and life beyond secondary school will demand (Kpornu, 2019).

Age constitutes a central factor in understanding how SHS students grow into academic language and construct learner identities (Eckert, 1996). As students move from SHS 1 through SHS 3, their relationships with language change markedly within a relatively short window of time (Ochs & Schieffelin, 1984). Students entering SHS often still rely on the more relaxed linguistic habits carried over from JHS, whereas students nearing the end of SHS encounter increasing expectations to use formal academic language consistently, including outside the classroom (Edu-Buandoh & Otchere, 2012). This within-phase transition represents not only an increase in academic demands but also a shift in how students understand themselves (Eckert, 1996). SHS 3 students are expected to communicate with greater confidence, participate more independently, and demonstrate forms of language use associated with maturity, academic competence, and readiness for WASSCE and life after secondary school (Kpornu, 2019; Dwinalida & Siateji, 2022).

These difficulties are not new to SHS; they typically begin much earlier in the Ghanaian education system. Gyan (2022) found that primary school pupils in the Asante Akim North Municipality already faced substantial challenges acquiring English as a language taught largely as a foreign subject rather than as a language of everyday communication, a difficulty compounded by limited teaching and learning materials and constrained opportunities for meaningful classroom interaction in the early years of schooling (Frimpong, 2021). By the time learners reach SHS, the demand for academic English builds on an already uneven foundation, which helps explain why the transition into and through SHS carries such heightened linguistic and social stakes.

In Ghana, SHS students are expected to develop academic language skills, including formal vocabulary and subject-specific communication, while negotiating between English and indigenous languages through practices such as code-switching and translanguaging (Agbozo & Rescue, 2020; Bisilki, 2018). This is because academic English proficiency influences students' participation, identity, and recognition as capable learners within the school environment (Adzahlie-Mensah & Dunne, 2018).

However, challenges such as limited exposure, inadequate resources, and motivational factors continue to affect English development (Kpornu, 2019; Gyan, 2022), with some learners experiencing language-related barriers to educational participation (Kyereko & Faas, 2021; Hurwitz & Kambel, 2020). Despite existing research on language policy and multilingual practices, limited attention has been given to how SHS students progressively develop academic language and construct learner identities across SHS 1 to SHS 3. Therefore, this study examined how age-related progression influences students' academic language development and identity construction, using the following objectives:

1. To examine how SHS students use language differently as they progress from primary education into Senior High School.
2. To investigate how age-related progression within SHS influences the construction of students' academic identities.
3. To identify the linguistic features that students and teachers associate with educational maturity within the SHS context.

Literature Review

Academic Language and Its Development

Within applied linguistics, a well-established distinction separates the conversational language young people acquire quickly and informally from the more specialised, cognitively demanding language required for academic tasks, such as reading textbooks, writing essays, following abstract argumentation, and using subject-specific vocabulary (Cummins, 2000). This register typically takes considerably longer to develop than everyday conversational fluency, and SHS represents the period during which this

developmental gap becomes most consequential, as learners encounter increasingly complex disciplinary content and rising examination stakes. Academic language is also characterized by particular grammatical features, including nominalization, passive constructions, complex clause structures, and technical vocabulary (Halliday, 1978), that are relatively rare in everyday speech but increasingly present in SHS textbooks and examinations. For Ghanaian SHS students who are simultaneously consolidating English as an additional language and learning the academic register of that language, these two developmental tasks are intertwined rather than separate.

Language Use and Academic Communication in Ghanaian Schools

Ghana's language-in-education policy has long oscillated between English as a medium of instruction and mother tongue-based approaches such as the National Literacy Acceleration Programme, which uses indigenous languages to build early literacy before transitioning learners toward English (Owu-Ewie & Eshun, 2019). Despite periodic policy efforts to raise the status of Ghanaian languages, English remains in an entrenched position as the language most closely associated with educational success, and many parents, students, and teachers treat proficiency in English as effectively synonymous with being educated (Edu-Buandoh & Otchere, 2012). Some schools formally or informally sanction the use of Ghanaian languages on the compound, reinforcing English as the unmarked, legitimate code of the school space, and this is often felt most acutely by students as they move through SHS (Edu-Buandoh & Otchere, 2012).

At the same time, classroom practice on the ground is often more fluid than official policy suggests. Ghanaian SHS classrooms frequently exhibit code-switching and translanguaging, in which teachers and students move between English and a shared Ghanaian language to clarify content, manage classroom relationships, or soften the formality of instruction (Agbozo & Rescue, 2020). Owusu et al. (2022) emphasize in their review of West African multilingual classrooms that rigid monolingual policies often fail to align with the communicative realities of learners, who strategically deploy their full linguistic repertoires to navigate academic demands. Their findings suggest that effective academic language development in Ghanaian SHS contexts must acknowledge and build upon students' existing multilingual competence rather than treating it as a deficit to be overcome.

Age, Identity, and Communities of Practice

Sociolinguistic research on age as a social variable emphasizes that age is not merely a chronological fact but a socially constructed category, indexed through language in the same way as gender or class (Eckert, 1996). As students move through the three years of SHS, they pass through successive peer groupings, or communities of practice, each with

its own norms for how one is expected to talk, and each linked to a stage of presumed maturity. Moving from SHS 1, where teachers may still tolerate more code mixing carried over from JHS, toward SHS 3, where WASSCE preparation and subject specialization raise the stakes of sounding right, students are socialized not just into a language but into a way of being an older, more serious, more academically credible person (Ochs & Schieffelin, 1984).

Motivation and Academic Language Learning

Motivation is widely recognized as a central determinant of success in learning an additional language and its academic register. Sahin et al. (2016) found that learners' perceptions of English as a valuable, prestigious language were closely linked to their motivation to learn it, while Tosuncuoğlu (2021) identified both intrinsic factors, such as personal interest and self-confidence, and extrinsic factors, such as teacher encouragement and social expectations, as significant influences on language learning motivation. Within the Ghanaian secondary context specifically, Dwinalida and Siateji (2022) found a positive relationship between senior high school students' motivation and their English learning achievement, suggesting that motivated students are more likely to engage with and internalize the academic language demands of their schooling.

Owusu (2020) found that corrective feedback significantly improved the business communication texts of technical university students in Ghana, suggesting that the feedback loops observed in SHS classrooms serve a critical function in moving learners toward academic register proficiency. Owusu and Afram (2019), reviewing language-teacher education principles in the Ghanaian context, note that teachers who understand the interactional dynamics of second language classrooms are better positioned to scaffold students' movement toward academic registers. These findings underscore the importance of teacher expertise in shaping students' developmental trajectories across the SHS years.

Gaps in the Literature

Despite the substantial body of research on multilingual education and language policy in Ghana, several gaps remain that this study seeks to address. First, while existing studies have documented the prevalence of code-switching and translanguaging in Ghanaian classrooms (Agbozo & Rescue, 2020; Bisilki, 2018), few have traced how these practices change systematically as students progress from SHS 1 to SHS 3. Most research treats the SHS phase as a monolithic category, obscuring the developmental shifts that occur within this three-year window.

Second, the relationship between age-graded identity construction and academic language development remains underexplored in the Ghanaian context. Although Eckert (1996) has theorized age as a sociolinguistic variable, empirical studies examining how

SHS students' self-conceptions as learners evolve alongside their language practices are limited. The present study fills this gap by examining identity and language development as co-constructed processes.

Third, while Owusu et al. (2022) and Owusu (2020) have examined multilingual classroom dynamics and corrective feedback in Ghanaian higher education settings, their studies have not specifically addressed the SHS level, where students first encounter sustained pressure to adopt formal academic registers. This study extends their insights downward to the secondary level, examining how the foundational language socialization processes described by Ochs and Schieffelin (1984) unfold during the critical SHS transition.

Theoretical Frameworks

Bourdieu's Theory of Linguistic Capital and Symbolic Power

Bourdieu's (1991) theory, one of the frameworks that underpins our study, treats language not as a neutral communicative tool but as a form of capital that is unevenly distributed and unevenly valued within what he calls a linguistic market (Bourdieu, 1991). In any given market, one variety is typically established as the legitimate, or standard, code, and command of that variety functions as symbolic capital, convertible into social and material advantage, while other varieties are devalued as a matter of social convention rather than any linguistic inferiority. Applied to the Ghanaian SHS classroom, this theory explains why formal academic English, rather than Ghanaian languages or informal spoken English, operates as the legitimate code of the school: it is the variety recognized by teachers, examiners, and the wider society as evidence of being educated. SHS students who can produce this variety confidently accrue linguistic capital that translates into teacher recognition, confident classroom participation, and a stronger academic self-image, whereas students who have not yet mastered it, particularly those newer to SHS, may be positioned, or may position themselves, as less academically capable. Bourdieu's theory explains why the acquisition of academic language during SHS carries social stakes and status implications that go well beyond vocabulary and grammar.

Language Socialization Theory

The study is also grounded in Ochs and Schieffelin's (1984) theory of language socialization, which holds that children acquire language and are socialized into social and cultural competence through the very same interactions, so that learning to speak in particular ways is inseparable from learning to occupy particular social roles (Ochs & Schieffelin, 1984). On this view, an SHS student does not first learn academic English and then separately learn to be an SHS student; the two processes happen together, through repeated participation in classroom routines such as recitation, question-and-answer

sequences, and written exercises that model what educated language sounds like. Language socialization theory also emphasizes that this process continues across settings, which makes it well suited to explaining age-graded change within SHS itself: as students move from SHS 1 through SHS 3, they are socialized, through cumulative classroom participation, into progressively more specialized registers and into the identities of increasingly mature academic subjects. This study uses language socialization theory to explain the developmental, age-linked dimension of the research questions.

Methods

The study employed a qualitative research design to explore how selected SHS students develop academic language and construct learner identities across SHS 1 to SHS 3. A qualitative approach was deemed appropriate because the study sought to understand participants' experiences, perceptions, and language practices in their natural classroom setting, rather than to test predetermined hypotheses or quantify variables (Creswell, 2014). The design was ethnographically informed, drawing on classroom observation, semi-structured interviews, and documentary analysis of students' written work to build a rich, contextualized understanding of language development and identity construction.

The study was conducted at Techiman Senior High School in the Techiman Municipality of the Bono East Region, Ghana. The school was selected purposively because it represents a typical Ghanaian SHS with a multilingual student body and a curriculum structured around the three-year SHS progression. The study drew on a purposive sample of 18 students, six from each of SHS 1, SHS 2, and SHS 3, together with three teachers who taught across the three levels. Students ranged in age from 15 to 18 years, consistent with the expected age range for the SHS phase in Ghana, and the sample was balanced by gender at each level. Teachers had between 4 and 15 years of classroom teaching experience and represented English Language and content subjects in which academic vocabulary demands are especially high.

The data were collected through three main instruments. First, classroom observations were conducted over six weeks, during which the researcher documented students' language practices, use of academic expressions, code-switching patterns, and teachers' language-related feedback. An observation protocol recorded the dominant language of instruction, instances of code-switching by teachers and students, use of subject-specific vocabulary and discourse connectives, and instances of self-correction or peer correction. Second, semi-structured interviews were conducted with all 18 student participants and the three teacher participants. The student interview guide explored participants' perceptions of changing language expectations, experiences of code-switching, self-conceptions as learners, and the social consequences of speaking academic English. The teacher interview guide solicited perspectives on changing expectations of

academic language development across SHS levels, strategies for supporting register acquisition, and observed differences between SHS 1 and SHS 3 students. Interviews were conducted in English, recorded with consent, and transcribed verbatim for analysis.

Third, documentary analysis examined students' written exercise books, test scripts, and essay assignments. These documents provided concrete evidence of students' developing control over academic register features such as formal connectives, passive constructions, complex clause structures, and subject-specific lexis.

The data were analysed thematically and through discourse analysis. Thematic analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase approach, involving familiarization with the data, generation of initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the final report. Discourse analysis examined how participants constructed meanings around academic language, maturity, and identity through their lexical choices, narrative structures, and reported speech acts. Findings from the different data sources were triangulated to understand the relationship between age, academic language development, and identity construction within SHS. The use of multiple, independent qualitative data sources followed established principles of triangulation in empirical social research, which hold that convergence across observation, interview, and documentary data strengthens the validity of interpretive claims (Manheim & Rich, 1991).

Ethical procedures were followed by obtaining permission from relevant school authorities, informed consent from participants and guardians, and assent from students. Participation was voluntary, and participants were informed of their right to withdraw at any time without penalty. Participants' confidentiality was maintained through the use of pseudonyms in all transcripts and reports. Interview recordings were stored securely and accessible only to the researcher. The study adhered to the ethical guidelines for educational research set forth by the university's ethics review board.

Findings

Observed Classroom Language Patterns and Indicators of Academic Maturity

The observational data results showed a clear developmental gradient in how students used language in class as they moved from SHS 1 to SHS 3. Early SHS lessons showed a marked shift away from the fluid code-switching carried over from JHS toward more English-dominant talk, with switching typically reserved for managing discipline or clarifying a difficult concept, alongside students' own reports of consciously suppressing home language words in class. By SHS 3, code-switching in formal instructional talk had reduced further, alongside a widening overall linguistic repertoire, as students moved between more careful academic English in class and freer Ghanaian language talk with peers outside class. Written samples corroborated the observation data: SHS 1 scripts showed increased use of subordinate clauses and subject-specific vocabulary but frequent

grammatical inconsistency; SHS 2 scripts showed growing, but uneven use of formal connectives; and SHS 3 scripts showed longer, more complex sentences, more consistent use of formal connectives such as however, therefore, and in addition, and greater lexical range appropriate to examined subjects.

Table 1: Classroom language patterns and indicators of academic maturity

SHS Level	Dominant Code in Class Talk	Approx. Code-Switch Rate	Common Academic Markers
SHS 1	English-dominant, with frequent strategic switching	Moderate to high	Emerging subject vocabulary; early self-monitoring of grammar
SHS 2	English-dominant, with strategic switching	Moderate	Subject vocabulary; longer clauses; peer correction of correct English
SHS 3	Academic English in class; switching reserved for outside class	Low in class	Discourse connectives; passive constructions; discipline-specific lexis

Source: Observed classroom data (2026)

Objective One: How SHS students use language differently as they move from primary to SHS

By early SHS, students described a noticeable tightening of expectations around English use, even during informal moments of the school day. A student newly arrived in SHS 1 explained how this pressure had begun to shape his own speech habits. *`"In SHS, the teachers say we should try to speak grammar, so now I dey try hard to use English even for break time, small small. It is not easy at first, because for JHS we could just talk anyhow. But I am getting used to it small small." [Student SHS 1, 15 years]*.

Some SHS 1 students described the shift as confusing at first, since the rules for when English was required were not always clear to them. *"When I just came to SHS, I did not know when to use English and when I could still talk small Twi. My friends were laughing at me because I was still doing JHS style. Now I understand better, but at first it was confusing." [Student SHS 1, 16 years]*.

Subject-specific vocabulary emerged as a growing demand for SHS students,

particularly in science subjects where technical terms carried real assessment weight. *"For Science there is plenty of new words, so I have to learn them well before exams, not like before in JHS. Some of the words are too long and I do not even know them for Twi self. So I just have to cram them and understand what they mean." [Student SHS 2, 17 years]*.

By SHS 2, students reported that English had become the expected default in most classroom exchanges, with Twi reserved for very specific moments. *"Now in SHS 2, English is just how we talk in class, every time. We only use Twi if the teacher is vexed or if somebody really does not understand at all. It is not like before where we could just mix anyhow." [Student SHS 2, 16 years]*.

Teachers, too, observed this developmental shift from the front of the classroom, particularly the growing self-monitoring students displayed as they moved through SHS. *"I have noticed that by SHS 2 most students try hard not to mix languages in front of me, even though outside they still do it freely. It shows they now understand what is expected of them in class. By SHS 3, some of them are even correcting their mates when they slip." [Teacher, SHS English Teacher].*

By SHS 3, students described their language habits as fully adjusted, with English use extending naturally beyond the classroom into other formal school settings. *"By now, in SHS 3, I do not even struggle anymore. English just comes out, even for assembly or when I am talking to a teacher outside class. When I remember how I used to talk in SHS 1, I laugh small." [Student SHS 3, 18 years]*.

Objective Two: How age within SHS influences the construction of academic identities

Entry into SHS appeared to trigger an explicit sense of outgrowing childhood ways of speaking. *"Now that I am in SHS, I feel like I should talk more seriously, not like small children again. My old JHS friends still dey play with words anyhow. But me, I feel say I have grown small, so I try to talk well." [Student SHS 1, 16 years]*.

Some SHS 1 students linked their motivation to speak well directly to a fear of being seen as childish by their new classmates. *"When I came to SHS 1, I did not want people to think I am still a small boy from JHS. So I try to talk fine English, even if I sometimes get it wrong. At least they will see I am trying to grow." [Student SHS 1, 15 years].*

Peer status among SHS students was frequently tied to perceived English competence, with fluent speakers gaining both teacher approval and classmate respect. *"When you speak good English, teachers respect you more, and even your classmates will*

say you are a serious student, not just playing around. Some of my friends who do not speak well, they get shy to answer questions in class. I do not have that problem because I practice a lot." [Student SHS 2, 17 years].

For some students, academic identity was tied not just to speaking well but to being trusted with responsibility because of it. *"Because I speak well, the teacher always picks me to read in front of the class or to explain to the junior students. It makes me feel like I am someone the teacher can trust. That is why I do not want to disappoint her." [Student SHS 2, 16 years]*.

By SHS 3, some students described taking on informal mentoring roles toward their junior colleagues, treating language correction as a mark of their own growth. *"Now that I am in SHS 3, sometimes I help the SHS 1 students with their English, because I remember how it was for me. It shows I have grown, and I understand school work well now." [Student SHS 3, 18 years]*.

Teachers actively reinforced this connection between age and linguistic maturity through their everyday classroom talk. *"I always remind them that as they move from SHS 1 to SHS 3, they are not small children again, so their English should also grow. Most of them take it seriously, because nobody wants to sound like they have not grown." [Teacher, SHS English Teacher]*.

A sense of institutional pride accompanied this maturity for some final year students, who linked their language use to representing the school well. *"As SHS 3 students, we are the seniors in the school now, so I make sure my English is correct, especially when visitors come. It is like we are representing the whole school, not just ourselves." [Student SHS 3, 17 years]*.

Objective Three: Linguistic features become associated with educational maturity

By SHS, students began deliberately incorporating formal discourse connectives into their writing, often explicitly linking this choice to teacher expectations. *"Now I try to use because, therefore, those connecting words, especially for essays, because the teacher said it makes the work look serious. Before, I used to just write short sentences. Now my essays are longer, and the teacher gives me better marks." [Student SHS 1, 15 years]*.

Some SHS students showed early, if imperfect, awareness of specific grammatical structures associated with academic writing, such as the passive voice common in science reports. *"Passive sentence, like the experiment was conducted, that one dey show say person don grow for English. Our Science teacher taught us that structure for our practical*

reports. Now when I write like that, I feel like a real scientist." [Student SHS 2, 16 years].

Peer accountability around grammatical correctness intensified during SHS, with students policing one another's speech as much as teachers did. *"My friends will laugh if you make a grammar mistake in class, so we self-correct before even the teacher does. Nobody wants to be the one who spoils their sentence in front of everybody. So now, before I talk, I think small first." [Student SHS 2, 17 years]*.

Some students described a growing habit of rehearsing their sentences mentally before speaking in class, especially during SHS 2 and SHS 3. *"Before I raise my hand to answer, I first arrange the sentence well in my head. I do not want to just talk anyhow and everybody will laugh. So sometimes I even keep quiet if I am not sure my grammar is correct." [Student SHS 2, 17 years]*.

Subject teachers reported a clear developmental shift in students' command of technical vocabulary over the SHS years, moving from vague references to precise terminology. *"By SHS 3, the good students use the right scientific terms, not just the thing or that one like before. When I mark their scripts now, I can see they have learned the proper vocabulary. It really shows in how they explain their answers during oral questions too." [Teacher, SHS Science Teacher]*.

By the final year, several students described longer, more elaborated written answers as a deliberate marker of how far they had come. "When I compare my SHS 1 exercise books to now, SHS 3, my sentences are longer, and I explain more. Before, I would just write short answers and finish. Now I know the teacher wants a full explanation, so I write more." [Student SHS 3, 18 years].

Discussion

The results demonstrate that SHS students' language development is a gradual process through which they acquire academic communication practices while simultaneously constructing identities as mature learners. The transition from primary education into SHS represents not only an increase in academic language demands but also a shift in how students understand and present themselves within educational spaces. The findings are discussed in relation to the three objectives of the study: changes in students' language use from primary to SHS, the influence of age on academic identity construction, and the linguistic features associated with educational maturity.

The findings indicate that students' language use changes significantly as they progress from primary education into SHS. Students reported movement from more informal, conversational language practices toward greater use of formal vocabulary,

subject-specific terminology, complex sentence structures, and controlled classroom communication. This aligns with Cummins' (2000) distinction between conversational and academic language, which suggests that learners require sustained exposure and practice to develop the more complex language forms demanded by formal education. The increasing use of academic English among SHS students also resonates with Bourdieu's (1991) theory of linguistic capital, which argues that particular language forms gain value within institutional contexts. In the SHS environment, English functions as a valued academic resource because it is associated with examinations, classroom participation, and educational progression. Students' efforts to improve their English use therefore represent not only language learning but also attempts to acquire a form of linguistic capital that enhances recognition and academic legitimacy.

The findings further corroborate research on multilingual practices in Ghanaian classrooms, where students and teachers frequently combine English and indigenous languages to support understanding and classroom interaction (Agbozo & Rescue, 2020). However, the present findings extend this literature by showing that students' use of multilingual resources changes across educational stages. While younger learners and SHS 1 students relied more heavily on code-switching as a learning support strategy, students in higher SHS levels demonstrated increased awareness of when formal English was expected. This suggests that academic language development involves gradual movement between linguistic resources rather than complete replacement of indigenous languages. Owusu et al. (2022) argue that multilingual classroom settings in West Africa require pedagogical approaches that recognize the functional distribution of languages across domains; the present findings support this view by demonstrating that SHS students develop metalinguistic awareness about which codes are appropriate for which contexts, effectively managing their repertoires rather than abandoning their home languages.

The findings reveal that age and progression through SHS influence how students perceive themselves and how they are perceived by others within the school environment. Students associated movement from SHS 1 to SHS 3 with becoming more responsible, confident, and academically mature. This resonates with Ochs and Schieffelin's (1984) language socialization theory, which proposes that individuals learn language while simultaneously being socialized into particular social roles. Through classroom participation, teacher feedback, peer interaction, and academic expectations, students learned both how to communicate academically and how to perform the identity of a successful student. This is consistent with Eckert's (1996) sociolinguistic view of age, which suggests that age is not merely a biological category but a social position associated with particular behaviours and expectations. Within SHS, older students were expected to demonstrate greater control over language, increased confidence, and more appropriate academic behaviour. Thus, progression through SHS represented a social transition in which students gradually adopted the linguistic practices associated with educational

maturity.

The connection between language and identity also supports Adzahlie-Mensah and Dunne's (2018) argument that English continues to occupy a powerful position within Ghanaian education. Students' perceptions that speaking English well increased teacher trust and peer respect demonstrate that language ability contributes to how learners position themselves within academic communities. Similarly, concerns about unequal access to academic English corroborate findings by Kyereko and Faas (2021) and Hurwitz and Kambel (2020) that language proficiency influences participation and educational inclusion.

The findings identified several linguistic features that students and teachers associated with educational maturity, including reduced spontaneous code-switching during formal classroom interaction, increased use of academic vocabulary, improved grammatical accuracy, and greater ability to construct complex explanations. This corroborates Bourdieu's (1991) argument that institutions attach social value to particular ways of speaking, as these linguistic features became markers through which students demonstrated competence and seriousness. The increased self-monitoring and peer correction observed among students further resonate with Douglas et al.'s (2019) explanation of how groups develop and reinforce shared norms. In the SHS context, correct English became a socially recognized expectation maintained not only by teachers but also by students themselves. Peer correction therefore functioned as a mechanism through which academic language standards were collectively maintained.

The role of motivation in developing these linguistic features also corroborates previous research linking motivation with English learning achievement (Dwinalida & Siateji, 2022; Sahin et al., 2016; Tosuncuoğlu, 2021). Students' desire to avoid embarrassment, gain teacher approval, and be viewed as competent learners encouraged greater attention to language use. This resonates with Doley's (2024) stimulus appraisal framework, which suggests that learners' behaviours are influenced by how they interpret and respond to socially meaningful situations. Furthermore, Owusu (2020) found that corrective feedback significantly improved the business communication texts of technical university students in Ghana, suggesting that the feedback loops observed in this study serve a critical function in moving learners toward academic register proficiency. Owusu and Afram (2019), reviewing language-teacher education principles in Ghana, noted that teachers who understand the interactional dynamics of second language classrooms are better positioned to scaffold students' movement toward academic registers; the present study's teacher participants appeared to enact this understanding through their explicit reminders about age-appropriate language use.

Conclusion

The study examined the relationship between academic language development and identity construction using a selected senior high school in Ghana. The findings suggest that SHS students' academic language development should be seen as a gradual process that happens from SHS 1 to 3, instead of perceiving it as an outcome that is attained at a specific point in time. Language facilitators can, therefore, use students' multilingual backgrounds as important resources for studying, as they (i.e., facilitators) provide the right approach in assisting them (i.e., students) to develop the right academic English skills. This, therefore, means that teachers should be trained on how to facilitate content in multilingual settings that is aimed at developing students' academic language skills. Syllabus designers should also explore contemporary programmes that aim at improving students' writing, vocabulary, and communication skills, as they build their confidence from JHS to SHS through oral presentations. In contributing to language socialization theory, the study suggests that students should develop academic identities together with their learning of formal language activities.

Recommendations

Grounded in the study's results, we recommend that:

1. Syllabus designers should provide language support that reflects students' changing needs as they progress from SHS 1 to SHS 3, recognising that academic language skills develop gradually over time.
2. Syllabus designers should create language support initiatives that align with students' growing linguistic needs and acknowledge the steady progress of academic language ability across the SHS years.
3. Language teachers should be given professional training that equips them to understand cross-cultural communication activities, especially in multilingual classrooms (Owusu and Afram, 2019).
4. Senior High School administrators must generate an enabling setting where students can draw on their diverse languages as they are being directed on how to use the right academic registers in formal school settings.
5. Language facilitators should assist learners in developing academic language through consistent communication and also pay attention to how their academic registers and identities develop during tertiary education through to their professional lives. Thus, mentoring should be a lifetime process.
6. Drawing on Bourdieu's (1991) concept of linguistic capital, language policymakers should develop language policies for post-colonial educational settings by integrating socialisation theory.

Declaration of AI-Assisted Editing

AI tools were used solely to improve the grammar, clarity, and readability of this manuscript. All scientific content and interpretations are the original work of the authors.

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