East African Journal of Education and Social Sciences
EAJESS January-February 2026, Vol. 7, No. 1, pp. 1-11.
ISSN: 2714-2132 (Online), 2714-2183 (Print). Published by G-Card
DOI: https://doi.org/10.46606/eajess2026v07i01.0475.

Embedding Diversity and Inclusion in Multilingual English Language Lessons: Student-Teachers' Meanings and Practices in Ghana

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Abstract

This study examined how undergraduate student-teachers understand and enact diversity and inclusion in English language education during teaching practice in Ghanaian basic schools. It focused on the meaning student-teachers attach to inclusive English language teaching, the supports and constraints they encounter during practicum and the implications for teacher education and school-based mentoring. The study adopted a qualitative approach. Forty-nine student-teachers were drawn from the University of Education, Winneba's Department of Basic Education. Data was generated through five focus group discussions and ten semi-structured interviews and analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis. The findings reveal that while student-teachers value inclusion, they experience difficulties in enacting their commitment teaching practices. Key constraints include mentor-teacher modelling that prioritizes transmission teaching, pressure to 'cover' examinable content, limited teaching and learning resources, large class sizes, and uncertainty about how to use learners' home languages to support English learning without being sanctioned. The study recommends that curriculum and assessment frameworks, practicum mentoring and school leadership practices are strengthened and aligned to operationalize inclusion in everyday English lessons and to support the persistence of inclusive practices beyond practicum.

Keywords: Diversity; inclusion; practicum; student-teachers; translanguaging; English language education.

How to cite: Agbevivi, S. L. G. and Akoto, L. (2026). Embedding Diversity and Inclusion in Multilingual English Language Lessons: Student-Teachers' Meanings and Practices in Ghana. East African Journal of Education and Social Sciences 7(1), 1-11. **DOI:** https://doi.org/10.46606/eajess2026v07i01.0475.

Introduction

In recent decades, the concepts of diversity and inclusion have moved from being peripheral considerations in educational discourse to central themes that shape curriculum reform, pedagogy and assessment (UNESCO, 2020; OECD, 2023). In English language education (ELE) in particular, the demand for more inclusive approaches stems from increasing recognition of the complex and pluralistic realities of learners' linguistic and cultural identities. Rather than viewing diversity as a challenge to be managed, contemporary scholarship increasingly positions it as a resource for meaningful learning, learner engagement and identity affirmation (García & Otheguy, 2020; Yunhua & Budiman, 2024).

English holds a dual role in Ghanaian education, serving as both a subject of study and the medium of instruction (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, 2019). This dual role reflects its colonial legacy and its symbolic status as a language of upward mobility and global participation. Yet,

despite its prominence, classroom practice often privileges standardized, monolingual models of English that are poorly aligned with learners' lived multilingual abilities (Arkhurst et al., 2025).

In practical terms, this can take the form of English-only classroom rules that discourage learners from using familiar languages to ask questions, clarify meaning or negotiate tasks with peers. In some lessons, learners are corrected or mocked for local-language accents, code-switching or 'non-standard' grammatical patterns, even when meaning is clear. In such contexts, multilingual ability becomes something learners must hide, instead of a resource that can support comprehension, participation and confidence (Opoku-Amankwa, 2009; García & Otheguy, 2020). This mismatch creates barriers to equitable participation, limits learners' ability to leverage their full linguistic resources and risks reinforcing subtractive bilingualism in which proficiency in local languages are marginalized. Yet, we still know too little about how these tensions are experienced and managed by undergraduate student-teachers during practicum.

Calls to embed diversity and inclusion as routine practice within schooling are not new. In many contexts, including Ghana, inclusivity has been treated as an 'add-on' to existing teaching practices, invoked rhetorically in policy documents but not consistently embedded into classroom practice, assessment systems or teacher education (Naami & Mort, 2023). This study builds on the global imperative to move inclusivity from the margins to the center of ELE, exploring how this can be achieved through the perspectives and practices of undergraduate student-teachers at the University of Education, Winneba (UEW). However, how these commitments translate into everyday English lessons during practicum (where mentoring, school norms and assessment pressures shape what novices feel permitted to do) remains insufficiently documented.

The linguistic landscape of Ghana is diverse, with over 80 living languages, including 73 indigenous languages, alongside English and other non-indigenous languages (Ansah, 2014). While English serves as the official language, local languages remain the primary means of communication in homes and communities (Arkhurst et al., 2025). In many basic schools, learners enter upper primary with limited exposure to English, making the transition to English-medium instruction (EMI) a significant barrier to learning. This linguistic transition is exacerbated by resource constraints, such as large class sizes, inadequate teaching materials and insufficient training on multilingual pedagogies, which leave teachers ill-equipped to manage inclusivity effectively (Naami & Mort, 2023). Understanding how student-teachers interpret these pressures and what they do in real lessons in response, is necessary for strengthening practicum support and making inclusive English teaching more realistic.

These pressures are reinforced by assessment-driven routines that prioritize coverage and test-oriented tasks, making it difficult for novice teachers to sustain learner talk, flexible grouping,and multilingual scaffolding during English lessons (Baidoo-Anu & Baidoo, 2022; OECD, 2023). Student-teachers from University of Education, Winneba (UEW) face these tensions acutely during their practicum. When student-teachers enter basic schools for practicum, they often meet classroom routines shaped by high-stakes assessment pressures, including heavy reliance on drill, test-oriented tasks and time-intensive preparation for examinations, alongside English-only expectations that limit multilingual support for learning (Baidoo-Anu & Baidoo, 2022; Feikaab et al., 2025; Opoku-Amankwa, 2009). This duality highlights the gap between policy aspirations and school-level realities, underscoring the need for research that privileges the voices of student-teachers as they navigate these contradictions.

Although Ghana has a well-established Inclusive Education Policy (Ministry of Education, Ghana, 2015), the practical implementation of inclusivity in English language classrooms (ELCs) remains underexplored. Much of the literature on inclusion in Ghanaian education focuses on disability and access (Naami & Mort, 2023), with comparatively little emphasis on linguistic and cultural inclusivity in ELE. Studies that do examine language in education often highlight the persistence of monolingual ideologies, despite widespread informal use of translanguaging strategies by both teachers and students (Dankwa-Apawu et al., 2025).

Undergraduate student-teachers may encounter inclusivity in coursework yet during practicum they face systemic barriers (exam-driven pacing, large class sizes, limited materials and unclear guidance), cultural barriers (English-only ideologies, stigma attached to disability, mother tongue) and

institutional barriers (uneven mentoring, limited supervision and feedback, lack of inclusive teaching resources, school norms) (Adu-Yeboah & Kwaah, 2018; Naami & Mort, 2023; Baidoo-Anu & Baidoo, 2022).

In Ghana, recent work highlights how multilingual classroom realities persist alongside strong English-only expectations, creating daily dilemmas for teachers and learners about what counts as legitimate participation and 'proper English' in school (Arkhurst et al., 2025; Dankwa-Apawu et al., 2025). These pressures are intensified by assessment-driven routines that prioritize coverage and examinable outputs, even when such routines limit opportunities for inclusive support in English lessons (Baidoo-Anu & Baidoo, 2022).

Accordingly, this study foregrounds student-teachers' accounts of what inclusion means in English lessons, what conditions enable or constrain their practice during internship and what forms of teacher education and mentoring support are needed to sustain inclusive approaches. The general purpose of this study is to understand how undergraduate students-teachers on practicum in Ghana make sense of diversity and inclusion in ELCs and how these understandings shape what they attempt in day-to-day instruction.

Theoretical Framework

The study is informed by three complementary theoretical positions that help to explain the gap between inclusive policy intentions and the day-to-day realities student-teachers meet during practicum. These are Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory, Guskey's Teacher Change Model and Inclusive Pedagogy as developed by Florian and Black-Hawkins. Vygotsky's (1978) Sociocultural Theory explains learning as a socially mediated process, where development occurs through guided participation in real activity. Two ideas are central here. First, learning is mediated through interaction with more knowledgeable others and through cultural tools, including language. Second, the Zone of Proximal Development highlights what a novice can do with support, beyond what they can do alone (Vygotsky, 1978; Mercer & Howe, 2012). In this study, the theory helps to interpret practicum as a site where student-teachers learn to teach inclusively through mentoring, peer dialogue, and classroom interaction. It also helps to explain why inclusive practice is uneven. Where mentors model inclusive routines and give practical guidance, student-teachers are more able to attempt strategies, such as adjusting tasks, using mixed-ability group work and permitting purposeful multilingual support to build understanding and participation. Where mentoring is limited or corrective rather than supportive, student-teachers are more likely to follow established routines that prioritize coverage and examination preparation.

Teacher Change Model (Guskey, 2002) clarifies how teacher beliefs and classroom practice shift over time. Guskey argues that professional learning often influences classroom practice first and that changes in beliefs tend to follow when teachers see evidence that new practices improve learner engagement or achievement (Guskey, 2002). This model addresses a key issue in the study gap, namely why inclusive strategies are sometimes treated as optional even when teacher education promotes them. For student-teachers, trying an inclusive approach during practicum is more likely to become part of their regular practice when they can see concrete benefits, such as quieter learners contributing more, learners understanding tasks better or classroom participation becoming more respectful and orderly. When such evidence is absent, or when school structures discourage experimentation, student-teachers may revert to the dominant practices in the placement school.

Florian and Black-Hawkins' (2011) Inclusive Pedagogy provides a lens for defining what 'inclusion' means in mainstream classrooms. Florian and Black-Hawkins argue that inclusion is not best understood as a set of separate techniques for a few learners, but as a commitment to extending what is ordinarily available to everybody so that difference is anticipated in planning and participation, is widened as a normal expectation (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011). This framing is important for ELE in multilingual contexts because it supports the view that learners' varied linguistic resources, identities and learning needs should be planned for as part of ordinary English teaching, rather than treated as disruptions to 'proper' English lessons.

These theories guide the study's focus on how student-teachers learn and justify inclusive practice in real classrooms. Sociocultural Theory explains how inclusive teaching is taken up, resisted, or reshaped through mentoring and school routines. Guskey's model explains why certain inclusive moves become sustained only when student-teachers see learner benefits that matter in their

settings. Inclusive Pedagogy clarifies what counts as inclusion in everyday English lessons and supports an interpretation of practicum experiences that moves beyond policy rhetoric to practical decisions about participation, classroom relationships and learning opportunities.

Literature Review

Diversity and inclusion are now widely treated as core quality indicators in education, not optional add-ons. In practical terms, diversity refers to the visible and less visible ways learners differ, including language background, ethnicity, gender, disability status, socio-economic position, religion, location and prior schooling experiences. Inclusion goes further than simply placing learners in the same classroom; it concerns how teaching, assessment, classroom relationships and school culture are organized so that all learners can participate meaningfully and achieve. This understanding has shifted attention from 'fixing' the learner to improving everyday teaching and school practices. Inclusive pedagogy, for instance, emphasizes teaching approaches that anticipate learner variation, avoid rigid grouping or labelling and provide multiple ways for learners to engage with content and demonstrate learning (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011; OECD, 2023). In language education, this orientation is especially important because language can function both as a resource for learning and as a gatekeeper that sorts learners by accent, fluency and familiarity with 'approved' forms of English.

Within ELE, debates about diversity and inclusion often surface through questions of linguistic legitimacy and classroom norms. Many school systems still treat Standard English as the only acceptable form for learning and assessment, even in contexts where learners use multiple languages daily. In such classrooms, 'inclusion' is not only about disability or physical access; it also concerns whether learners' linguistic repertoires and cultural knowledge are recognized as legitimate resources for learning. Culturally relevant and culturally sustaining perspectives argue that teaching should connect academic learning to learners' identities and community knowledge and that schooling should not demand learners abandon their languages and ways of meaning-making to succeed (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Paris & Alim, 2017). These perspectives align with more recent work in Global Englishes and anti-racist language education that challenges narrow models of 'good English' and calls for teaching approaches that reduce linguistic shame and expand legitimate participation for multilingual learners (Yunhua & Budiman, 2024).

In Ghana, questions of inclusion in ELCs are inseparable from the country's language-in-education history and its continuing implementation challenges. Post-independence policy has oscillated between different bilingual arrangements and stronger English-only tendencies, often producing uncertainty at the level of classroom practice (Ansah, 2014; Anyidoho, 2018). Where English is treated as the only legitimate classroom language, learners who have limited exposure to English outside school can become silent, anxious or positioned as weak, not because they lack ideas but because they lack safe opportunities to think and express those ideas during lessons. Studies of Ghanaian classrooms have shown how English-only expectations can narrow interaction and reduce learner participation, especially when learners are disciplined for using familiar languages to seek clarification or test understanding (Opoku-Amankwa, 2009; Anyidoho, 2018). For ELE, the implication is clear: monolingual classroom norms can unintentionally deepen inequities between learners with different home-language backgrounds and different access to English beyond school.

Current scholarship on multilingual pedagogy provides useful tools for addressing this problem. Translanguaging, for example, is not simply 'mixing languages;' it describes how multilingual speakers draw flexibly on their full linguistic and semiotic resources to make meaning, learn and communicate. In classroom terms, translanguaging can include allowing brief peer discussion in a Ghanaian language to process a new text, using familiar language to explain difficult vocabulary before returning to English, inviting learners to compare how meaning is expressed across languages or permitting bilingual drafting before producing a final English version. Such practices can strengthen comprehension and participation while still supporting English development (García & Otheguy, 2020; Wei, 2018). Ghana-based studies further suggest that these choices are already present in many classrooms, even when they are unofficial or discouraged and that teacher decisions about language use are shaped by school culture, assessment expectations and beliefs about what counts as 'proper teaching' (Arkhurst et al., 2025; Dankwa-Apawu et al., 2025). The problem, therefore, is not only whether teachers know

inclusive strategies, but whether classrooms and schools permit them.

School pressures linked to examinations and public perceptions of 'quality' schooling can also sustain rigid English norms. In many low-resourced contexts, English is strongly associated with social mobility and this can encourage schools to adopt strict English-only rules to signal seriousness, even when learners are still developing academic English. Evidence from comparable multilingual settings shows that English-medium and English-only practices can reproduce inequality when learners' and teachers' proficiency levels are mismatched and when classroom interaction becomes dominated by rote copying, chorus responses and memorization aimed at tests rather than meaning-making (Brock-Utne & Holmarsdottir, 2004; Dearden & Macaro, 2016). For Ghana, this account indicates that inclusive ELE is not only a matter of teacher goodwill. It requires pedagogical permission, realistic assessment practices and school leadership support that protects teachers who adopt learner-centered and multilingual strategies.

Teacher education and practicum experiences are crucial in this discussion because practicum is where student-teachers learn what is rewarded in real classrooms. Even when university courses promote inclusive language pedagogy, student-teachers often enter schools where routines are already established and where mentors, heads and expectations about 'control' shape what novice teachers feel able to attempt. Ghanaian research on practicum indicates recurring constraints, including uneven mentoring quality, pressure to conform to mentor routines, limited instructional resources, heavy workload and supervision practices that prioritize compliance over reflective growth (Adu-Yeboah & Kwaah, 2018). Where inclusive strategies, such as group work, learner talk or multilingual scaffolding are perceived as noisy, time-consuming or risky for examination coverage, student-teachers may abandon these strategies even when they believe they are educationally sound. This is consistent with broader evidence that sustained teacher learning depends not only on training content but also on ongoing support, coherence with the school context and opportunities for guided practice and feedback (Desimone & Garet, 2015; Guskey, 2002).

Although inclusive education policy attention in Ghana has increased, much of the documented work still focuses on inclusion in relation to disability and access, with less detail on how inclusion is interpreted and enacted in subject classrooms such as English, especially under multilingual conditions. Recent studies have begun to highlight how teacher preparation for inclusive practice can remain uneven, particularly when pre-service training and school-level realities do not align (Naami & Mort, 2023). This study responds to that gap by focusing on how undergraduate student-teachers understand diversity and inclusion in ELCs and how their practicum experiences shape what they feel able to do. Locating inclusion within everyday classroom language norms, teaching routines and practicum cultures makes it possible to generate recommendations that are practical for curriculum design, mentoring and professional learning in multilingual basic-school contexts.

Methodology

Design

This study adopted a qualitative exploratory design within an interpretivist orientation, on the basis that meanings of inclusivity are socially produced and best understood through participants' accounts of their practicum experiences (Cohen et al., 2018; Creswell & Poth, 2018). This design was appropriate because research on how Ghanaian undergraduate student-teachers interpret and enact inclusivity in ELE during practicum remains limited, particularly in relation to everyday school routines and expectations.

Population and Sampling

The population comprised final-year undergraduate student-teachers in the Department of Basic Education, University of Education, Winneba (UEW), who had completed at least 12 weeks of internship and had responsibility for English lessons or ensuring English-across-the-curriculum during internship. UEW was selected because it is a major teacher education institution in Ghana, its training curriculum explicitly foregrounds learner-centered and inclusive pedagogies and its student-teachers form a key part of the future teaching workforce. The students' practicum experiences offer practical insight into how inclusivity is negotiated in schools.

Purposive sampling was used to recruit participants who met the inclusion criteria and could provide information-rich accounts of inclusive practice during practicum. Variation was sought in internship school context (urban, peri-urban and rural schools), language backgrounds and school types to capture a

range of experiences. Participants' placement schools typically had class sizes ranging from 25 to 65 pupils, reflecting common structural conditions in Ghanaian basic education. Sample adequacy was considered in relation to the specificity of the study focus, the quality of dialogue generated and the depth of information obtained, rather than relying on a simple saturation claim (Braun & Clarke, 2021).

Instruments

Two complementary qualitative instruments were used to enable triangulation. These are focus group discussions (FGDs) and follow-up semi-structured interviews. The FGDs were organized to encourage shared reflection on dilemmas, enablers, constraints, language choices, assessment practices and mentoring during practicum. Each FGD lasted approximately 60-90 minutes and typically involved seven to eight participants, consistent with established guidance for interactive group discussion (Morgan, 1996; Kitzinger, 1995).

Follow-up semi-structured interviews (approximately 30-60 minutes) were conducted with selected participants to probe issues that emerged in the FGDs and to explore individual experiences in greater depth, especially tensions with mentors and examples of lesson adaptation. All interviews and FGDs were audio-recorded with participants' consent, transcribed verbatim, and anonymized prior to analysis.

Validity and Reliability

To align with qualitative standards, rigor was addressed through trustworthiness strategies rather than statistical reliability. Lincoln and Guba's (1985) criteria of credibility, dependability, confirmability and transferability guided the approach. Credibility was strengthened through triangulation across FGDs and interviews and by using verbatim extracts to anchor interpretations. Dependability and confirmability were supported through an audit trail, including preserved transcripts, analytic memos and documented coding decisions. Transferability was supported through clear description of the study context, participants and practicum conditions so that readers can judge relevance to similar settings. These procedures align with quality principles for qualitative inquiry (Braun & Clarke, 2021).

Data Analysis

Data analysis followed reflexive thematic analysis, selected for its flexibility and its fit with interpretivist qualitative work (Braun & Clarke, 2021). The analytic process involved familiarization with the data, initial coding, focused coding, theme development and iterative review and refinement of themes.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical procedures included voluntary participation, informed consent and the right to withdraw without penalty. Pseudonyms were used and identifying details of schools and participants were removed from transcripts and reports. Data was stored securely on password-protected devices. During FGDs, participants were reminded to respect group confidentiality and to avoid sharing peers' contributions outside the discussion. Interview participants were informed that they could decline to answer any question.

Findings and Discussion

Analysis of data collected produced three linked sets of findings aligned to the study objectives. First, the findings show how student-teachers explained diversity and inclusion in ELCs. Second, they highlight the supports and constraints that shaped what student-teachers felt able to do during practicum. Third, they point to curriculum, policy and professional learning implications for embracing inclusion as an everyday principle in ELE. Across the dataset, participants' accounts moved between what they believed inclusive English teaching should look like and what school routines, mentor expectations, and assessment pressures allowed in practice. This section therefore, presents the themes as both descriptions of experience and explanations of why inclusive intentions were sometimes sustained and sometimes constrained.

For transparency, quotations are attributed using respondent codes. 'FGD' refers to focus group discussants and 'INT' refers to interview participants, followed by an anonymized student-teacher identifier (e.g., FGD2-ST05, INT4-ST19).

Objective 1: To establish student-teachers' meanings and narratives of diversity and inclusion in English language classrooms.

Student-teachers generally described inclusion as a professional responsibility that requires deliberate planning for differences in ability, language background, confidence and culture. Their accounts show that inclusion was understood less as placement or access and more as participation and classroom belonging.

For instance, one participant explained that inclusion is about '*planning for different abilities and backgrounds'* (FGD1-ST03) while another stressed that inclusion goes beyond disability to include '*language, confidence and culture'* (FGD1-ST06). A third participant framed inclusion as giving *'consideration to all learner's strengths and weaknesses'* (FGD1-ST02). Read this way, inclusion was not treated as a special program for a few learners, but as the expectation that classroom interaction and tasks should be organized so learners can participate safely and meaningfully (UNESCO, 2020; OECD, 2023).

These narratives reflect an orientation to inclusive pedagogy in which teachers design learning opportunities that do not treat learner difference as an exception (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011). At the same time, a minority of respondents indicated that inclusion is still interpreted narrowly in some school cultures, especially where support is equated only with disability-related adjustments. In such contexts, student-teachers reported having to justify why language background, participation patterns and learner confidence are also inclusion concerns (INT2-ST11). This tension suggests that student-teachers entered practicum with broad concepts of inclusion but they had to negotiate local meanings of what schools consider legitimate 'inclusive' work. Importantly, participants' accounts suggest that this negotiation was not only about beliefs; it was also about what mentors and school routines permitted student-teachers to do without being labelled as unserious. This sets up the next set of findings, which shows how school authority, material conditions and assessment pressures shaped whether inclusion was practiced openly, cautiously or not at all.

Objective 2: To establish enablers and constraints shaping inclusive practice during practicum

Across multiple accounts, practicum was described as the space where inclusive ideals met school routines and accountability pressures. Student-teachers identified constraints that repeatedly narrowed their ability to enact inclusive English teaching, even when they valued it.

Material and Organizational conditions

Large classes, limited materials and classroom space restrictions reduced the feasibility of differentiated tasks. A student-teacher who planned learning stations reported that there were *'not enough copies or space,'* so the lesson reverted to whole-class talk (INT1-ST07). Where basic resources were scarce, inclusion became dependent on improvisation, often using low-cost or locally available materials (FGD3-ST14).

These material constraints did not only affect classroom management; they also shaped what counted as feasible evidence of learning. Where there were few resources and limited space, student-teachers tended to default to whole-class routines that were easier to control and easier to assess quickly, even when those routines reduced participation for quieter or lower-proficiency learners. This aligns with broader concerns that inclusion efforts can be undermined when school systems promote equity in principle but provide limited structural support for differentiation and participation (OECD, 2023; UNESCO, 2020).

Mentoring Practices and School Authority

Mentors and school leaders shaped what student-teachers felt safe to attempt. Several respondents described being advised against strategies perceived as slow or difficult to 'mark', even when those strategies increased participation (FGD2-ST05). The authority of mentors was particularly visible in language-use decisions. One participant recounted being warned not to *'spoil their English'* by using a Ghanaian language to clarify meaning (INT3-ST16). Evidence from Ghana suggests that practicum mentoring can be uneven and may reproduce conservative teaching routines, when mentors prioritize compliance and examination preparation over guided experimentation (Kuyini, 2015; Kwaah et al., 2022; Naami & Mort, 2023).

Exam-Centered Accountability and Narrow Evidence of Learning

Student-teachers described the Basic Education Certificate Examination as a powerful force shaping lesson pacing, assessment format and classroom talk. When a student-teacher used posters and oral presentations to engage learners, the mentor questioned how the activity would prepare pupils for the examination (FGD4-ST21). Another participant wanted to use portfolios but explained that the continuous assessment template was rigid and *'did not allow space for multimodal evidence'* (INT5-ST27). Research shows that high-stakes testing pressure commonly narrows pedagogy and reduces teachers' willingness to use inclusive assessment forms that value growth, language mediation or multiple modes of expression (Au, 2007; Baidoo-Anu & Baidoo, 2022; OECD, 2021).

Policy Ambiguity and Fear of Sanction for Multilingual Support

Although student-teachers recognized that brief home-language support could improve comprehension and confidence, they described uncertainty about what schools officially permitted. This uncertainty was reinforced when mentors treated Ghanaian language use as a threat to English proficiency rather than as a scaffold for learning. As a result, some student-teachers reported using multilingual support quietly or only in small-group moments to avoid correction. This reflects a broader policy-practice gap in multilingual English-medium classrooms, where inclusive intentions are present but legitimacy is contested at school level (Arkhurst et al., 2025; Dankwa-Apawu et al., 2025; OECD, 2023).

Alongside these constraints, student-teachers identified enabling conditions that made inclusive practice more realistic. Two enablers were mentioned repeatedly: supportive mentoring that allowed guided risk-taking (INT4-ST19) and peer collaboration among student-teachers, especially joint planning and reflective conversations that helped them adapt tasks without abandoning inclusion goals (FGD5-ST32). These patterns align with sociocultural perspectives on learning in practice, where professional growth is strengthened through structured dialogue, modelling, and guided participation (Mercer & Howe, 2012; OECD, 2021).

Objective 3: To establish enactment of inclusive practice and implications for curriculum, policy, and professional learning.

Despite the reported constraints, student-teachers described deliberate attempts to widen participation through multilingual scaffolding, participation structures that reduce anxiety and assessment adaptations that recognize more than one form of performance.

Multilingual Scaffolding and Translanguaging as Inclusion Practice

Student-teachers frequently drew on Ghanaian languages to explain key vocabulary, clarify task instructions and support comprehension before returning to English. One participant explained that key words were clarified in Ewe to support understanding (INT6-ST35). Another described explaining composition questions in Ga and noted that learners' relief was visible in their responses (FGD6-ST37). A third gave an example where 'plot' was introduced in English and briefly explained in Twi, after which pupils retold the story in English more confidently (INT7-ST41).

These views are consistent with translanguaging as a principled pedagogy that mobilizes learners' full linguistic resources for meaning-making rather than treating languages as separate, competing systems (Wei, 2018; García & Otheguy, 2020). In Ghana, classroom evidence also shows that flexible language mediation can reduce anxiety and increase participation, especially where English-only expectations make comprehension fragile (Dankwa-Apawu et al., 2025; Opoku-Amankwa, 2009). Student-teachers' experiences, therefore, position translanguaging not as a last resort but as a practical inclusion strategy in English-medium classrooms, where learners' linguistic repertoires are central to access and confidence.

Participation Structures that Affirm Identity and Reduce Anxiety

Student-teachers described deliberate pairing and group work arrangements to support learners who were quiet, anxious or less confident in English. A participant reported pairing a Ga-speaking pupil with an Akan-speaking peer so they could negotiate meaning before whole-class sharing (FGD3-ST12). Another explained that group work and presentations were used to ensure participation and peer support (FGD3-ST13). Some also described simple identity-affirming practices, such as bilingual word walls and learner-created vocabulary banks using locally available materials, which increased ownership and willingness to speak (INT2-ST10; FGD2-ST08). Participants also framed multilingual scaffolding as purposeful and time-bound rather than replacing English instruction. They described using Ghanaian languages to secure understanding of task demands and key vocabulary, then returning to English for practice, presentation, and written work. This suggests that what mattered was not whether learners' home languages appeared in the lesson but whether language choices were used strategically to strengthen access to the English task and to protect participation for learners with fragile comprehension (García & Otheguy, 2020; Arkhurst et al., 2025; UNESCO, 2020).

However, participants often implemented these strategies cautiously because they anticipated mentor disapproval. Several stated that they used Ghanaian languages briefly and avoided being seen by mentors who disapproved (INT3-ST16; INT3-

ST18). Recent Ghana-based work similarly reports that multilingual classroom practices can be effective but remain contested when policy messages and school expectations are unclear (Arkhurst et al., 2025; Dankwa-Apawu et al., 2025).

Beyond participation as 'talking more', these strategies functioned as identity-affirming routines. When learners could rehearse ideas with peers, draw on familiar linguistic resources and see their languages represented in classroom materials, they were less exposed to embarrassment and more willing to attempt English contributions. This supports arguments that inclusive ELE requires expanding what counts as legitimate participation, particularly in multilingual settings, where narrow standards of 'good English' can create shame and silence (OECD, 2023; Yunhua & Budiman, 2024).

Assessment Adaptations and Limits of Current Reporting Formats

Student-teachers attempted inclusive assessment through oral retells, peer feedback checklists and collaborative tasks that allowed lower-proficiency learners to contribute meaningfully. One respondent observed that oral retells increased excitement and engagement, but the formal assessment sheet required a number that did not capture growth (INT5-ST27). Another stated that assessment requirements 'made way for numbers' without reflecting observed improvement (FGD4-ST24). These accounts show that inclusion was often enacted in classroom interaction, but it became harder to sustain when official reporting formats recognized only narrow outcomes. The findings, therefore, point to a structural contradiction: schools encourage 'learner-centered' teaching in principle, yet the tools used to judge progress can restrict the evidence teachers are allowed to value.

Planning for Varied Learning Needs in English Lessons

Student-teachers also described inclusion as planning for varied learning needs, including learners who struggled to read independently, learners who needed extra time and learners who participated better through supported oral work before writing. These adaptations were often improvised rather than systematically guided by mentors, suggesting a gap between inclusive policy intentions and day-to-day pedagogical support during practicum. Strengthening mentor guidance on practical classroom differentiation would therefore help student-teachers translate inclusion from principle into routine English lesson design (UNESCO, 2020; Naami & Mort, 2023).

The contradiction described by participants mirrors wider concerns that exam-driven accountability can narrow what teachers recognize as achievement and push classroom assessment towards easily counted outputs. In Ghana, performance-based accountability linked to large-scale testing has been shown to shape classroom priorities in ways that can reduce attention to deeper learning and inclusive participation (Baidoo-Anu & Baidoo, 2022; OECD, 2021). From an inclusion standpoint, this suggests that assessment reform is not a separate agenda; it is a practical condition for sustaining learner-centered and multilingual strategies in English lessons (UNESCO, 2020; OECD, 2023).

Collectively, these findings show that student-teachers' commitments to inclusion strengthened when they observed immediate learner outcomes, such as reduced anxiety, improved participation and clearer comprehension following multilingual scaffolding or supportive grouping. This reflects the logic of teacher change in which practice is more likely to shift when teachers see that particular strategies improve learner engagement and progress (Guskey, 2002). The findings support a sociocultural reading of practicum: when mentors model inclusive practices and provide guided space for experimentation, student-teachers extend what they can do; when mentoring emphasizes compliance and exam routines, inclusive practice becomes hidden, cautious or abandoned (Mercer & Howe, 2012; Kuyini, 2015; Naami & Mort, 2023).

Conclusions and Recommendations

In conclusion, the study demonstrates that undergraduate student-teachers' understandings of inclusion in ELCs are grounded in widening participation and fostering a sense of classroom belonging, reflecting a view of inclusion that encompasses both equitable access and relational practices embedded in everyday pedagogy. It further underscores that the enactment of inclusive practice during practicum is decisively conditioned by institutional ecologies, particularly mentoring authority, assessment expectations, pacing demands, material constraints and prevailing norms regarding legitimate language use and acceptable evidence of learning. Finally, the study affirms that while practicable inclusive teaching can be initiated within routine English lessons, its continuity and consolidation depend on systemic alignment across

curriculum guidance, assessment routines, mentoring practices and school-level supervision, without which inclusion is likely to remain episodic and uneven.

Recommendations

It is recommended that curriculum guidance for English makes inclusion operational by specifying practical strategies for supporting varied proficiency levels, participation patterns and learner confidence within ordinary lesson sequences. Additionally, assessment routines are broadened to legitimize multiple forms of evidence of learning, allowing teachers to recognize progress beyond narrow performance templates. Teacher education and professional learning should strengthen practicum-linked planning and structured reflection while preparing mentors to model inclusive pedagogy and provide formative feedback that promotes professional growth rather than mere compliance. Finally, school leadership and supervision must establish norms that protect learner participation, sustain respectful classroom interaction and explicitly legitimize pedagogically purposeful multilingual support where appropriate, to widen access to English learning. Further research should examine how mentors and school leaders construct inclusion in ELCs and through longitudinal designs, trace how early-career teachers sustain or abandon inclusive practices under the influence of assessment templates and school language norms.

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