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MITIGATING THE EFFECT OF BROKEN ENGLISH IN ACADEMIC WRITING: THEATRE FOR DEVELOPMENT AS INTERVENTION AT PEKI SENIOR HIGH TECHNICAL SCHOOL, GHANA

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Abstract:
English is the official medium of instruction in Ghana and is central to students' access to academic resources, classroom participation, and assessment. However, the widespread use of Broken English marked by systematic deviations from standard grammar, vocabulary, and usage influenced by local languages poses serious challenges to effective communication and academic achievement in many secondary schools. This qualitative case study investigated the prevalence and influence of Broken English in academic writing at Peki Senior High Technical School in the Volta Region of Ghana and explored the potential of a Theatre for Development (TfD) intervention to raise awareness and support improvement. Thirty students were purposively selected from different programmes through stratified sampling, and data were generated through document analysis of examination scripts and assignments, semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, and observations during a TfD workshop series. The findings indicated a high incidence of grammatical, syntactic, and vocabulary errors in students' scripts, undermining clarity, coherence, and overall academic performance. Students and teachers associated these patterns with limited exposure to standard English, strong influence of local languages, and low confidence in academic writing. The TfD activities of problem identification, script development from students' own errors, rehearsal, performance, and guided post-performance discussions helped students to recognize common error patterns, reflect critically on their language use, and begin to adopt more accurate forms in their subsequent writing. The study concludes that TfD offers a culturally grounded, participatory, and dialogic approach for conscientising students

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about Broken English and supporting more effective academic writing, and recommends its integration into language support programmes in Ghanaian secondary schools.
Keywords: Broken English, Theatre for Development, academic writing, language proficiency, intervention, qualitative research

1. Introduction

English proficiency is widely recognized by the Ghana Education Service as essential for academic success and broader socio-economic advancement, since it enables students to access textbooks, research materials, and online resources and to participate actively in classroom discourse (Ghana Education Service, 2020). Yet, in many Ghanaian schools, students' daily linguistic practices are characterized by *Broken English*, a hybrid form shaped by colonial history, multilingualism, and local cultural expressions, which often conflicts with the expectations of standard academic English (Ferguson, 1959; Phillipson, 1992; Mesthrie, 2017). In the context of this study, *Broken English* refers to non-standard, grammatically inconsistent forms of English that arise primarily from interference from Ghanaian indigenous languages and limited mastery of the structures of Standard English. It is characterized by inaccurate verb forms, faulty sentence construction, inappropriate vocabulary choices, direct translations from local languages, and other deviations that obscure meaning or hinder effective communication in academic contexts. Within the school environment, Broken English becomes problematic when it leads to misunderstandings in classroom instruction, misinterpretation of examination tasks, and reduced clarity in students' academic writing.

At Peki Senior High Technical School, this tension is especially visible in students' written work, where non-standard forms hinder comprehension and reduce grades. The problem extends beyond surface errors, affecting students' ability to articulate complex ideas, meet academic standards, and compete in an increasingly global academic and professional environment. Limited exposure to standard English in daily life, coupled with the pervasive influence of local Ghanaian languages and cultural expressions, poses formidable challenges to effective communication and comprehension (Ghana Education Service, 2020).

In response to these challenges, this study explored Theatre for Development (TfD) as a transformative, participatory strategy to engage students in critically examining their language practices and improving academic writing. TfD, as defined by Kerr (1991), is a creative methodology that involves communities and groups in collective research and critical analysis of their situation, facilitating the development and performance of scenarios reflecting participants' contexts and engaging them in dialogue, analysis, planning, and action toward positive social change. By transforming students' own linguistic struggles into shared dramatic material that could be analysed, questioned, and collectively re-imagined, TfD promised to reduce stigma around "wrong" English, foster critical awareness, and create memorable learning experiences directly linked to students' realities.

The study was guided by three research objectives:

1) to analyse the prevalence of Broken English in academic writing at Peki SHTS
2) to examine the influence of Broken English on students' academic performance
3) to use the TfD (forum theatre) approach to conscientise students on *Broken English* at Peki SHTS.

2. Literature Review

This section explores the existing literature on language challenges in academic writing, with a particular focus on the experiences of non-native English speakers in the Ghanaian educational system and the specific challenges they face. Special attention was given to the phenomenon of 'Broken' English, its defining characteristics, and the significant impact it had on academic performance

2.1 Broken English in Ghanaian Education

Broken English in African contexts reflects the continent's complex linguistic landscape, where English coexists with multiple indigenous languages and carries the legacy of colonial language policies (Phillipson, 1992; Mesthrie, 2017). In Ghanaian secondary schools, Broken English manifests in recurrent grammatical, syntactic, and vocabulary errors that obscure meaning and diminish the quality of academic texts (Labov, 1969). The phenomenon encompasses deviations from standard English grammar, vocabulary, and usage, often influenced by local languages and cultural expressions (Labov, 1969).

The historical context of colonialism has left a lasting impact on language attitudes and practices in Africa (Ferguson, 1959). During the colonial era, English was introduced as the language of administration, education, and commerce, leading to its widespread adoption as a lingua franca in many African countries. However, the imposition of English alongside indigenous languages has resulted in linguistic hybridity, with speakers incorporating elements from both English and local languages into their speech. In the Ghanaian context, the impact of Broken English is particularly pronounced within the educational arena. Despite English serving as the designated medium of instruction, students frequently grapple with language proficiency issues stemming from various factors (Ghana Education Service, 2020).

Students' reliance on hybrid forms is not merely a deficiency but also an expression of identity and local communicative norms. However, when these forms are transferred uncritically into high-stakes academic writing, they create barriers to achievement and progression. Studies on non-native English users in Ghana highlight how such deviations reduce clarity, coherence, and perceived academic competence, reinforcing educational inequalities (Labov, 1969; Phillipson, 1992).

2.2 Theatre for Development as Pedagogy

Theatre for Development has evolved as a participatory methodology that mobilizes drama, role-play, and collective performance to facilitate critical reflection and social

change within communities (Kerr, 1991; O'Toole & Dunn, 2002). In educational settings, TfD has been used to support language learning by placing learners in lifelike communicative situations, promoting communicative competence, cultural awareness, and confidence in oral expression (Davies, 1990; Saricoban, 2004; Kao, Carkin, & Hsu, 2011).

Scholars argue that drama-based approaches enable learners to explore language creatively, confront anxieties, and internalize structures through repeated performance and feedback (Astuti, 2016; Karahasanović-Avdibegović, 2023). Given its emphasis on dialogue, collective problem-posing, and action, TfD provides a suitable framework for addressing entrenched language practices such as Broken English. By transforming students' own linguistic challenges into performance material, TfD can make abstract grammatical issues concrete, emotionally resonant, and socially negotiable (Kerr, 1991).

The use of language in practical, everyday contexts is central to TfD's approach to language acquisition (Davies, 1990). Students are encouraged to express themselves in English within the context of dramatic performances, thereby bridging the gap between the formal language taught in the classroom and its real-world application. By incorporating English language activities into culturally relevant performances, students feel a deeper connection to the language. This cultural immersion not only makes language learning more meaningful but also helps students embrace standard English without negating their cultural identities (Kao et al., 2011; Astuti, 2016).

2.3 Nexus Between TfD and 'Broken' English

The relationship between Theatre for Development (TfD) and curbing the use of *'Broken' English* in Ghana is complex and multifaceted, drawing on aspects of language advocacy, community engagement, and cultural expression. TfD initiatives serve as dynamic platforms for exploring the complexities of language use and its impact on social interactions (Nyatuame, 2019). Through various mediums such as performances, workshops, and interactive sessions, TfD practitioners delve into the nuances of linguistic diversity, addressing issues like the prevalence of 'Broken' English and its implications for effective communication. Within these theatrical spaces, TfD productions often embed educational messages aimed at promoting linguistic proficiency and clarity in communication (Asante, 2022). By portraying scenarios where the misuse of 'Broken' English leads to misunderstandings or reinforces social stereotypes, TfD performances encourage audiences to critically reflect on their language habits and consider alternatives for clearer expression. Moreover, TfD fosters open dialogue and community participation, providing platforms for individuals to share their experiences, perspectives, and aspirations related to language use. Through forum theatre, role-playing exercises, and group discussions, TfD practitioners facilitate conversations about language attitudes, cultural identity, and the social dynamics of communication. TfD performers play a pivotal role as advocates for linguistic excellence, modeling clear and articulate communication both on and off stage (Owusu-Ansah, 2021). By using standard English in their productions and advocating for its importance across various domains

of life, TfD practitioners inspire audiences to strive towards linguistic competence and proficiency. Furthermore, TfD initiatives often integrate literacy programs and language development activities into their community engagement efforts. Through initiatives such as literacy workshops, language classes, and storytelling sessions, TfD contributes to breaking down barriers to effective communication and promoting access to education and economic opportunities. In summary, Theatre for Development serves as a catalyst for addressing the challenges associated with the use of 'Broken' English in Ghana. By promoting awareness, fostering dialogue, and empowering communities to strive for linguistic excellence, TfD plays a vital role in creating a more inclusive, communicative, and linguistically vibrant society.

3. Theoretical Framework

This study was grounded in two complementary theoretical frameworks. Language Interference Theory (Lado, 1957) explains how elements from students' first language (L1) and dominant local languages can interfere with the accurate production of English (L2), leading to systematic error patterns observed as Broken English. Error Analysis Theory (Corder, 1967) posits that errors are not merely failures but evidence of learning processes; systematic analysis of error patterns reveals students' developing interlanguage and can inform targeted teaching interventions

3.1 Freire's Theory of Conscientisation

Paulo Freire's notion of conscientisation deepens the theoretical understanding of how the TfD intervention in this study moved students beyond merely "correcting errors" toward critically re-examining their everyday language practices. Conscientisation is understood here as the development of critical consciousness, in which learners come to perceive how social, cultural, historical, and institutional forces shape their use of Broken English and its consequences for academic and professional life. In the context of Peki Senior High Technical School, many students initially perceived Broken English as harmless or even normal, especially because it functions as a unifying lingua franca in Ghanaian society; the TfD process sought to disrupt this taken-for-granted view by creating opportunities for reflection and dialogue around the academic and professional costs of relying on non-standard forms in formal settings.

Within this Freirean frame, Theatre for Development in the study is not only a communication strategy but a pedagogy of empowerment. The case-study design deliberately used students' own scripts and common errors as raw material for problem-posing theatre, inviting them to analyse situations where Broken English causes misunderstanding, low grades, or loss of credibility, rather than passively receiving teacher corrections.

Freire's emphasis on dialogic, participatory learning is also evident in the way the TfD intervention was structured. Rather than imposing a fixed moral lesson, the workshop cycles of problem identification, collective script development, rehearsal,

performance, and audience discussion positioned students as "spect-actors" who could question, intervene, and propose alternative behaviours, such as adopting more standard forms in examinations and interviews. This dialogic process resonates with a broader description of TfD in Ghana as collaborative and community-centred, drawing on indigenous performance traditions—storytelling, role-play, music, and communal debate that already function as everyday spaces for experiential and reflective learning.

4. Methodology

4.1 Research Design and Approach

The study adopted a qualitative case study design to enable an in-depth, contextualised exploration of Broken English in academic writing and the effects of a TfD intervention at Peki SHTS (Yin, 2018). A qualitative approach was chosen because it allows for rich, detailed descriptions of language use, perceptions, and experiences that are not easily captured through quantitative measures (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The case study method was particularly useful for gaining a comprehensive understanding of complex issues in their real-life settings and for conducting an in-depth exploration of the phenomenon within its context, utilising multiple data sources such as interviews, observations, and document analysis (Yin, 2018; Stake, 1995).

4.2 Site, Population, and Sampling

Peki Senior High Technical School, located in the Volta Region of Ghana, served as the research site. The school had a total population of 1,190 students across programmes, including General Arts, General Science, General Agriculture, Business, Home Economics, Visual Arts, and Technical (Academic Affairs, 2024). Stratified sampling was used to ensure proportional representation of these programmes. A qualitative sample of 30 students was selected for in-depth engagement, reflecting recommendations that data saturation in qualitative studies is often achieved with 20–30 participants (Guest, Bunce, & Johnson, 2006; Hennink, Kaiser, & Marconi, 2017). Stratified purposive sampling ensured that students with both high and low achievement in English were included, providing a comprehensive view of *Broken English* across the student population.

Table 1 below provides a detailed demographic profile of the respondents of the study. The analysis covers the distribution of respondents based on gender, age, and academic program.

Table 1: Demographic Profile of Respondents

Characteristics	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Gender		
Male	19	64.29
Female	11	35.71
Age		
Below 18 years	16	53.33
18 – 20 years	12	40.00

20 years and above	2	6.67
Programmes		
Business	2	6.67
General Art	5	16.67
General Science	2	6.67
General Agriculture	3	10.00
Home Economics	5	16.67
Technical	9	30.00
Visual Arts	4	13.33

4.3 Data Collection Instruments and Procedure

Four main instruments were employed: semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, observations, and document analysis. The document analysis involved a systematic review of 30 students' examination scripts and assignments to identify the prevalence and types of Broken English, categorised into grammatical (subject-verb disagreement, tense inconsistency), syntactic (word order errors, clause construction), and vocabulary-related errors (inappropriate lexical choices, direct translation from local languages). Semi-structured interviews captured individual experiences and perceptions of Broken English and academic writing from 10 selected students and 5 teachers. Focus group discussions (3 groups of 8–10 students) generated interactive discussions on shared challenges and strategies. Observations were conducted during TfD sessions and in informal school settings to monitor students' language use, confidence, and engagement over time.

4.4 The Theatre for Development Intervention

The Theatre for Development (TfD) intervention was implemented in line with the TfD structure for conscientization. They were interconnected activities designed to enhance students' awareness of how Broken English affects academic communication. The process began with problem identification, where common language errors identified through document analysis were shared with students to stimulate discussion. Based on these insights, students engaged in collaborative script development, creating short dramatic pieces that portrayed classroom and examination scenarios in which the use of Broken English led to misunderstanding.

These scripts were refined during rehearsals, allowing students to experiment with both ineffective and improved language forms. The resulting performances were then staged before an audience of peers and teachers, providing a realistic context for demonstrating the communication challenges being addressed. Following the performance, a structured post-performance discussion enabled students to reflect critically on the causes and consequences of language misuse, as well as consider more effective alternatives.

To assess the impact of the intervention, monitoring and evaluation were carried out through subsequent written tasks, which offered evidence of any improvements in students' academic writing. The entire intervention lasted six weeks and involved a core

group of 5–10 students as performers, while the full student sample participated as observers and contributors during discussions and follow-up activities.

4.5 A synoptic overview of the Drama for Conscientisation - *The Fall of Captain George Adams*

The Fall of Captain George Adams tells the story of George Adams, a student who repeatedly ignores his teacher's advice to learn Standard English, believing his family connections in the navy will secure his future. Years later, now a naval officer, Captain Adams is invited to deliver a keynote address at a passing-out parade. His speech becomes a public embarrassment as his use of *Broken English* leads to mispronunciations, grammatical errors, and confusion among the audience.

Through flashback scenes, the play reveals how George consistently dismissed warnings about the importance of proper language use. His professional humiliation ultimately exposes the long-term consequences of neglecting Standard English. The play serves as a cautionary tale, encouraging students to reflect on their own language practices and the impact these may have on their academic and professional success.

4.6 Data Analysis and Trustworthiness

Data were prepared through transcription, anonymisation, and organisation by source before being coded thematically using qualitative analysis procedures (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Thematic analysis focused on patterns related to the prevalence and forms of Broken English, perceived impacts on academic performance, and students' responses to the TfD intervention. Trustworthiness was enhanced through triangulation of multiple data sources, thick description of context, maintenance of an audit trail, and reflexive attention to researcher bias (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). Member checking was conducted by sharing preliminary findings with selected participants to confirm accuracy and interpretation.

5. Findings

This section presents the key findings that emerged from the document analysis, Theatre for Development (TfD) activities, and follow-up evaluation. The results highlight the nature and extent of language challenges faced by students, the specific forms of *Broken English* that recur across their academic work, and the ways in which the TfD intervention influenced students' awareness and use of Standard English. By examining patterns of errors and their underlying causes, the findings provide insight into both the linguistic constraints affecting students' academic performance and the pedagogical value of participatory theatre as a tool for addressing these challenges.

5.1 Prevalence and Forms of Broken English

Document analysis revealed a high prevalence of *Broken English* across scripts from all programmes at Peki SHTS. Frequent errors included:

1) **Grammatical errors:** subject-verb disagreement (e.g., "*The students is going*"), tense inconsistency (e.g., "*He go to school yesterday*"), and inappropriate article use.
2) **Syntactic errors:** non-standard word order reflecting local language structures (e.g., "*The book I read it yesterday*") and misplaced modifiers.
3) **Vocabulary errors:** direct transfer of local language concepts, inappropriate lexical choices that distorted intended meanings, and confusion of homonyms (e.g., "affect" vs. "effect").

These errors were not isolated slips but recurring patterns, indicating deep-seated difficulties with standard English norms rather than occasional carelessness.

Table 3: A summary of the prevalence rate of writing errors

Error Type	Number of Students	Percentage (%)
Grammatical errors	28	93.3
Syntactic errors	26	86.7
Vocabulary errors	24	80.0
Multiple error types in the same script	22	73.3

Students themselves acknowledged that their written English often mirrored the informal speech used with peers, shaped by local languages and community practices. Many reported limited exposure to standard English outside the classroom and described academic writing as intimidating and "foreign," which contributed to reliance on familiar but non-standard forms. One student remarked, "*When I write, my brain thinks in [local language], so I just translate it directly*."

5.2 Influence of *Broken English* on Academic Performance

Teachers interviewed for the study consistently linked *Broken English* to lower grades and weaker academic performance, particularly in subjects that relied heavily on written explanation and argumentation. Scripts with dense clusters of non-standard structures were more difficult to mark, leading to misunderstandings of students' ideas and lower scores even when conceptual understanding appeared present. As one teacher noted, *"When a student writes, 'I spend time decoding the meaning rather than assessing their understanding."*

Students reported that negative feedback on language discouraged them, reduced confidence, and sometimes led to disengagement from writing-intensive tasks. The combination of structural errors and low self-efficacy created a cycle in which students avoided extended writing, thereby missing opportunities to practice and improve. Several students stated that they felt embarrassed to speak or write in class for fear of making mistakes, limiting their participation and academic engagement.

5.3 Student Experiences of the Theatre for Development Workshops

The TfD sessions created a markedly different learning environment from the conventional classroom, characterised by play, collaboration, and embodied experimentation. When students saw their own error patterns transformed into

humorous or dramatic scenes, they became more willing to discuss mistakes openly and to suggest corrections collectively. Observations indicated increased participation, especially among students who were usually quiet in regular English lessons.

Reflective discussions after performances revealed that students had begun to recognise specific recurring errors in their writing and to articulate why these forms were problematic in academic contexts. Many expressed that acting out the consequences of miscommunication made the stakes of *Broken English* more concrete and memorable than conventional grammar drills. One student commented, *"When Captain Adams [the protagonist in the drama] could not communicate properly at the parade, I realised that broken English is not just about grades—it affects real life."*

Post-performance focus group discussions highlighted several key insights:

1) students appreciated seeing themselves and their peers in the performance and felt that the drama was relevant to their lives;
2) the humour in the scenes made learning about language less intimidating;
3) collaborative problem-solving during rehearsals and discussions fostered a sense of shared ownership of solutions; and
4) students expressed increased motivation to improve their English after the intervention.

5.4 Indications of Change in Writing

Comparative document analysis before and after the intervention suggested emerging improvements in some students' writing. While *Broken English* did not disappear, there were reductions in certain categories of errors, particularly those explicitly highlighted during TfD scenes and post-performance discussions. Some students began to self-correct tense use and subject-verb agreement more consistently and experimented with more standard sentence structures.

Interviews and focus groups conducted 4 weeks after the intervention confirmed that students felt more aware of their language choices and more motivated to attempt standard forms, even when unsure. Teachers also reported noticing incremental gains in clarity and organisation in scripts submitted after the workshop series, though they emphasised that sustained support would be required to consolidate these changes. One teacher observed, *"After the drama, students seemed to pause before writing. They appeared more conscious of their language choices*."

Follow-up observations during regular classes showed that some students were beginning to self-correct in peer discussions and written assignments. However, the gains were modest and uneven, suggesting that a single intervention, while valuable, was insufficient to reverse ingrained language patterns without ongoing reinforcement through school-wide strategies.

6. Discussion of Findings

The findings reinforce existing literature that positions *Broken English* in Ghanaian schools as both a reflection of multilingual realities and a barrier to academic success when transferred into formal writing uncritically (Ferguson, 1959; Phillipson, 1992; Mesthrie, 2017). At Peki SHTS, the high frequency and patterned nature of errors, with 93.3% of students displaying grammatical errors, show that students need more than corrective feedback; they require spaces to examine the social and linguistic roots of their language practices (Labov, 1969).

TfD, as implemented in this study, functioned as such a space by turning students' own linguistic struggles into shared dramatic material that could be analysed, questioned, and re-imagined collectively (Kerr, 1991). The intervention's participatory and experiential nature appeared to reduce stigma around "wrong" English, foster critical awareness, and create memorable learning experiences linked directly to students' realities (O'Toole & Dunn, 2002; Karahasanović-Avdibegović, 2023). These outcomes suggest that TfD can complement conventional language teaching by embedding explicit attention to form within meaningful, culturally resonant activities (Kao et al., 2011; Astuti, 2016).

However, the modest scope and time-bound nature of the intervention mean that observed improvements were necessarily limited. Changes in deeply ingrained language practices require sustained reinforcement through school-wide strategies, teacher training, and integration of drama-based techniques into ongoing English and writing instruction (Davies, 1990). While post-intervention follow-up showed promising indicators of increased metalinguistic awareness and motivation, the lack of long-term data collection limits conclusions about whether these early changes would persist and translate into durable improvement in academic writing.

The study also reveals the importance of addressing the affective dimensions of language learning; thus, students' confidence, anxiety, and sense of belonging in academic contexts, alongside technical skill development. By creating a safe, playful space for exploring language errors, TfD appears to have reduced the shame and fear that often accompany language correction in conventional classrooms, enabling more engaged and risk-taking participation (O'Toole & Dunn, 2002).

7. Conclusion and Recommendations

This study has demonstrated that *Broken English* is pervasive in academic writing at Peki Senior High Technical School, affecting 93.3% of the student sample in grammatical errors alone and significantly constraining students' ability to communicate clearly and succeed academically. It has also shown that a carefully designed Theatre for Development intervention can raise students' awareness of their linguistic choices, increase confidence, and begin to support more accurate academic writing.

The findings of this study highlight the potential of Theatre for Development (TfD) as a pedagogical tool for improving language awareness and academic writing in

Ghanaian secondary schools. To strengthen the application of TfD in language education and enhance its long-term impact, the following recommendations are proposed:

7.1 Integrate TfD into English Language Curricula

Schools should embed TfD-based activities within existing English language and writing curricula, using students' authentic texts as material for dramatization, analysis, and reflection. This requires equipping teachers with basic training in drama-based pedagogy to ensure that the approach is sustained beyond isolated interventions.

7.2 Strengthen School-Level Language Support Systems

Schools should develop comprehensive language support programmes that combine participatory drama, peer-review activities, and targeted writing workshops. These programmes should be informed by a systematic analysis of recurring error patterns in students' academic writing.

7.3 Promote Critical Metalinguistic Awareness

Language instruction should encourage students to reflect critically on the sociolinguistic factors influencing their language use, including mother-tongue interference, identity, and communicative context. By framing language "errors" as part of a developing linguistic repertoire, teachers can foster confidence and deeper learning.

7.4 Expand Research on TfD in Language Education

Further research is needed to explore the applicability of TfD to other language-related challenges across diverse school settings in Ghana. Longitudinal studies are particularly important for understanding the sustained impact of TfD on students' writing development and for refining best practices.

Collectively, these recommendations underscore the need for participatory, culturally grounded, and reflective approaches to language education. By positioning TfD as both a pedagogical and developmental tool, schools can foster deeper linguistic awareness, improved writing competence, and more empowered learners capable of engaging critically with their own language practices.

Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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