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Conversation Breakdown and Institutional Discourse in Ghanaian ESL Classrooms: A Conversation Analytic Investigation

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ABSTRACT

This study responds to the growing pedagogical interest in optimizing communicative competence within English as a Second Language (ESL) classroom interaction by investigating a critical, yet under-explored, domain, the interactional trouble sources that initiate conversation breakdown. Grounded in a Conversation Analytical (CA) framework, the research methodology utilizes a hybrid approach: CA modeling for the micro-analysis of recorded data and content analysis for the qualitative interview data. The empirical base consists of 52 h of recorded ESL classroom discourse extracted from the Ghana Senior High School corpus of academic spoken English database collected by the researchers and research assistants, and augmented by interviews with practicing ESL teachers. A systematic analysis of the interactional sequences showed a pronounced presence of both etic (analyst-defined) and emic (participant-oriented) conversational trouble sources. The findings delineate six salient categories of trouble sources, namely, mishearing/non-hearing, vagueness, topic transition, information deficit, and lexical inappropriacy. These trouble sources demonstrably impeded interactional flow. Notably, the research establishes that the origins of these trouble sources are multi-layered, transcending mere surface-level linguistic (phonology, syntax, lexis) deficiencies to include institutional factors such as instructional ambiguity, procedural misalignments, disciplinary actions, and culturally situated vocabulary choices. This evidence mandates that future ESL

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research accord greater significance to the impact of institutional discourse (especially, classroom discourse) features as a primary generator of interactional trouble.

Keywords: Conversation Breakdown; Repair; Trouble Source; Conversation Analysis; ESL Classroom; Ghana

1. Introduction

The effective communication of meaning and the accurate interpretation of intended messages constitute a central concern for participants in conversational interaction[1]. Reaching mutual understanding requires more than mere exchange of messages; it requires speakers to clearly demonstrate their understanding of prior utterances and to produce responses that are both sequentially pertinent and contextually fitting[2]. Studies show, however, the preponderance of 'trouble' or 'repairables' in the production and interpretation of utterances in human interaction. Indeed, the concept of a "trouble source" describes instances where interlocutors encounter difficulty comprehending, hearing, or producing utterances[3]. These sources of miscommunication are diverse, encompassing major categories such as lexical, morphological, phonological, and pragmatic issues[1,4–6].

Given the critical nature of expected flawless interaction, it is incumbent upon English as a Second Language (ESL) teachers and learners to insist on or maintain a conscious awareness of trouble sources that precipitate conversational breakdowns within classroom discourse, in order to facilitate effective lesson delivery[7,8]. This imperative is amplified in educational contexts where English is not the learners' first language[9,10]. Consequently, teachers' skill and proficiency in identifying trouble sources and effectively managing (mitigating or eliminating) communication breakdowns are recognized as an invaluable professional skill and obligation[11].

In the empirical literature on trouble sources, one observes global scholarly literature consistently investigating trouble sources in conversational exchanges[1,4,12]. For example, lexical, semantic content-related, and sequential/speech delivery issues have been identified as the primary trouble sources triggering communication breakdowns in the repair practices employed by EFL college students[1]. Similar findings on the manifestation of trouble sources in repair practices have been reported in Iraqi university viva discussions conducted in English[4]. Specifically, these findings have shown that grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation, discourse, factual information, channel processing, and the repair of non-errors all acted as conversational disruptors. Mokeira[12] investigated the discourse units that signal conversation breakdowns in Kenyan secondary school group guidance and counselling sessions. Her study highlighted mishearing, vagueness, and the statement of incomplete information as contributors to communication failure. Collectively, the above-mentioned body of research underscores the multifaceted and context-dependent nature of trouble sources that impede effective communication across various educational settings in different cultural and geographic domains.

Despite the substantial empirical evidence demonstrating the value of comprehending these trouble sources for enhancing ESL teaching and learning, it has been observed that there is an unfortunate lack of awareness persisting among many ESL educators and students with respect to specific trouble source types that contribute to classroom interactional breakdowns, frequently resulting in less than optimal standards in learner performance[7,13].

While the overall pertinent literature is rich, a notable gap exists regarding this issue within the specific ESL context of Ghanaian Senior High Schools, where proficiency in English is critical for academic success. This investigation is thus guided by the following research question: What are the trouble sources that signal instances of conversation breakdown in the ESL classroom, and how are instances of such trouble resolved?

Aims and Expected Contributions

The primary objective of this study is to furnish valuable empirical insights into how teachers and students manage communication breakdowns during classroom interactions. Specifically, the study seeks to investigate the complexity of teacher-student talk in ESL environments and to systematically identify areas of learner struggle, such as difficulties related to tense, grammar, and syntax. Also examined is how instances of such trouble are resolved.

The anticipated findings are intended to inform and improve the design of instructional materials, enhance real-time teacher responses, and improve overall classroom interactional dynamics. Beyond direct instructional benefits, this research aims to support teacher professional development by elevating linguistic and communicative awareness, furthering the implementation of more effective interactional management strategies, and cultivating engaging classroom environments that ultimately enhance learner participation and optimal academic outcomes.

2. Literature Review: Sources and Taxonomizing of Communicative Trouble in ESL Classroom Discourse

Communication breakdown in spoken interactions is frequently initiated by trouble sources stemming from such linguistic and paralinguistic dimensions as content, delivery, framing, and speaker intention[3,7]. The available empirical literature delineates three primary, non-mutually exclusive domains of the sources, namely performance-related and language-related problems, and ambiguity[1,4,12]. When interlocutors detect a potential comprehension problem, they typically implement various repair strategies to enhance explicitness and resolve the miscommunication, thereby facilitating mutual understanding and restoring intersubjectivity[14–16].

Building on the conversation analytic tradition, Mokeira[12] offers a systematic classification of core interactional trouble sources that aligns closely with Schegloff et al.'s conceptualisation of trouble as any feature of prior talk that impedes understanding, acceptability, or progressivity of interaction[17]. The categories identified include inaudibility, mispronunciation and grammatical problems, paucity of information, lack of knowledge, lack of clarity, lack of detail, lack of specification, and break of pattern.

These categories correspond to Schegloff, Jefferson and Sacks'[17] broad understanding of trouble sources as emerging at multiple levels of talk-in-interaction. Phonetic and phonological problems (e.g., inaudibility, mispronunciation) obstruct hearing and recognition; grammatical difficulties affect syntactic intelligibility; and informational deficits (paucity of information, lack of detail or specification) undermine the adequacy of turns for the ongoing activity. Epistemic troubles, reflected in a lack of knowledge, constrain participants' ability to produce conditionally relevant next actions, while problems of clarity generate ambiguity that invites repair initiation. Finally, breaks of pattern parallel Schegloff, Jefferson and Sacks'[17] observations on sequential trouble, where deviations from expected turn design or action trajectories disrupt interactional progressivity and prompt repair.

Research in EFL settings further corroborates and refines these categories, highlighting trouble sources such as mispronunciation, mishearing, vagueness, lack of clarity, grammatical and lexical errors, disfluency, poor comprehension, and the influence of physical noise. The above body of literature affirms that effective spoken communication relies on shared understanding, which is continually threatened by a variety of linguistic, paralinguistic, and contextual challenges.

Theoretical Framework: Conversation Analysis Theory

This study is grounded in the theoretical and methodological framework of Conversation Analysis (CA), which provides an empirical lens for scrutinizing the interactional norms and systematic communicative practices that participants deploy to achieve mutual understanding[18]. In this study, CA is utilized to methodically examine the co-construction of meaning in naturally occurring talk-in-interaction through the demonstrable, sequential organization of conversation[2].

With respect to the core tenets of CA, traditionally, the theory concentrates on speech as a rigorously observable phenomenon, emphasizing the analysis of naturally occurring interactions[19]. Conversations are viewed as inherently dynamic systems, frequently characterized by phenomena such as interruptions, topic shifts, or diversions, which fundamentally reflect the fluidity and situated nature of social interaction[20].

A central focus of CA is the principle of turn-taking, which constitutes the foundational mechanism underpinning all conversational exchange[21,22]. Analyses typically involve detailed consideration of the structure, content, and duration of turns-at-talk, all of which are subject to variation based on the situational context, whether formal or informal. For instance, institutional talk, such as teacher-student

or lawyer-client exchanges, generally exhibits more constrained and structurally regulated turn-taking patterns[23]. In contrast, casual conversations, such as peer interactions, offer greater structural suppleness, often motivated by such a relational dynamic as power asymmetries[24].

An essential component of CA, and a key focus of this study, involves the empirical identification and subsequent resolution of interactional 'trouble' instances. These 'troubles' encompass a range of phenomena, including mishearing, non-hearing, misunderstanding, lexical retrieval difficulties, and/or the provision of inaccurate information.

Such disruptions are systematically addressed through 'repair' mechanisms, which may be initiated and completed either by the speaker (self-initiated-self-repair) or by the interlocutor (other-initiated-other-repair). There is a well-documented normative preference for self-initiated self-repair within the established CA model. The genesis of conversational repair devices is historically traceable to Sacks, Schegloff and Jefferson[21] and Kenworthy[25], who initially developed the devices to empirically scrutinize the conversational dynamics between children with hearing impairments and their caregivers. While initially developed for this specific context, these repair strategies have proven highly adaptable to adult-adult interactions, serving not necessarily to address physiological impairments but rather to facilitate smooth conversational flow and minimize unwarranted sequential deviation[25]. Typology of Conversational Repair Practices is presented in **Figure 1** below:
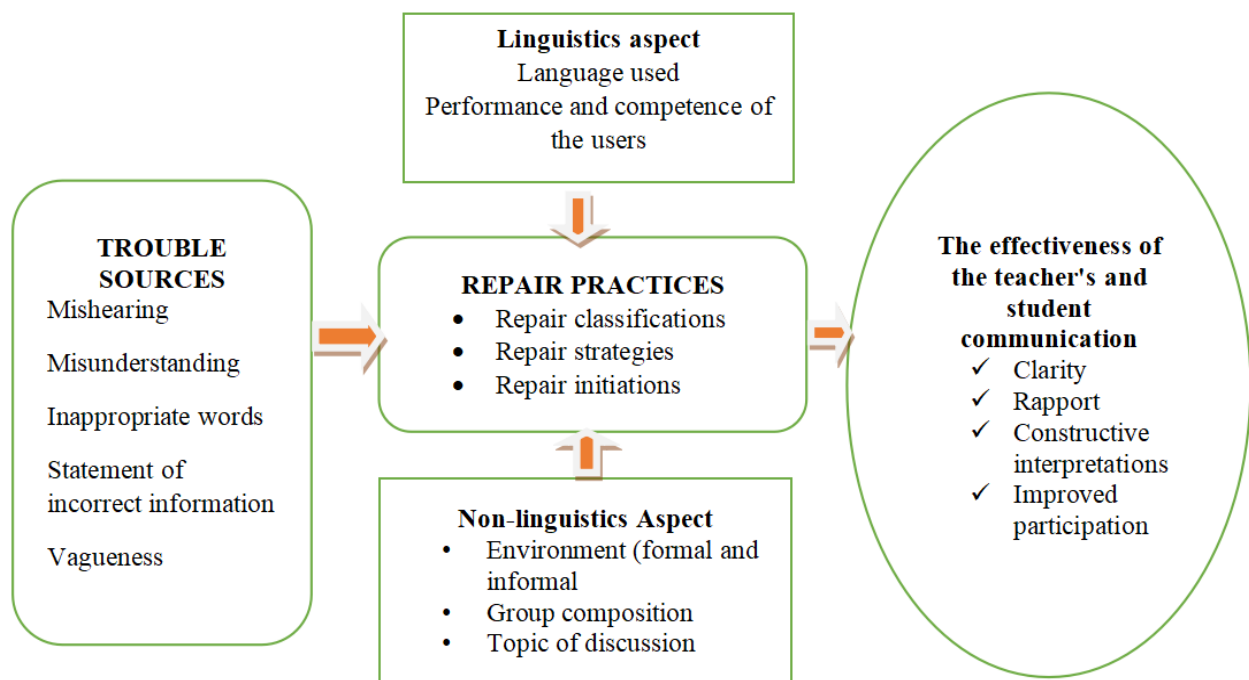

Figure 1. Typology of Conversational Repair Practices[25].

The theoretical framework, illustrated in **Figure 1**, models the predicted influence of specific interactional difficulties (namely mishearing, non-hearing, misunderstanding, inappropriate word usage, and misinformation dissemination) on teacher-led ESL classroom interactions. Conceptually, the above-mentioned trouble sources function as the input, while their consequences on classroom discourse constitute the output. The relationship between input and output is moderated by two primary factors: linguistic and non-linguistic processes and the application of conversational repairs during discourse. The moderating factors include: (a) linguistic processes that encompass aspects such as language usage, participant performance, and competence; and (b) non-linguistic processes which involve elements like the classroom environment, group composition, and discussion topics. These processes collectively shape the trajectory of interaction. Importantly, conversational repairs, as employed by interlocutors, act to navigate and mitigate the challenges arising from the identified trouble sources.

3. Methods

3.1. Research Design

The inquiry employed Brewer's [26] Classroom Ethnography design, targeting micro-level dynamics within the classroom environment. This approach facilitates a close inspection of detailed teacher-student interactions, centring on the discourse, behaviours, and routines that constitute classroom culture [26]. Key ethnographic elements explored by Brewer [26] include student engagement, classroom repair practices, teacher-student relationships, and the implicit "hidden curriculum". Our study was conducted in twenty-six ESL classrooms located in the Upper East Region of Ghana.

Classroom ethnography and CA were integrated by using ethnography to frame the setting and participant roles, while CA was applied to fine-grained analysis of naturally occurring teacher-student talk. Ethnographic observation across the 26 ESL classrooms established recurring routines, norms, and participation structures, which guided the selection of interactional episodes for detailed CA of turn-taking, repair, and sequential organization. In this way, ethnography provided contextual depth, and CA supplied analytic precision at the micro-interactional level.

Limited, targeted interviews were included to complement (not replace) naturally occurring talk. They were used to clarify participants' orientations to observed practices (e.g., engagement, repair, and expectations) and to illuminate aspects of the hidden curriculum that may not be fully accessible through interactional data alone. Kept minimal and focused, the interviews served an interpretive function without shifting the analytic emphasis away from classroom interaction itself.

Regarding analytical procedure, this study operated within a pragmatics paradigm [27], which collectively informed our insight into conversation initiation practices in the Ghanaian ESL classrooms. The general analytical procedure adapted phases from both Rymes' [28] and ten Have's [29] Conversation Analysis (CA) methodologies. Rymes [28] outlines a four-step process: (1) recording the interaction, (2) viewing and making preliminary observations, (3) transcribing the talk and action, and (4) analyzing the transcripts. Conversely, ten Have [29] proposes four steps: (1) recording, (2) transcribing, (3) analyzing the transcript, and (4) reporting the result. Recognizing the distinct value of the omitted

steps in each model (Rymes' preliminary observation for data familiarization and ten Have's reporting for completion), we integrated these into a comprehensive five-step analytical design, namely: recording the classroom interaction, viewing the interaction and making preliminary observations, transcribing the talk and action, reporting the results, and analyzing the transcripts. This is presented in **Figure 2** below:
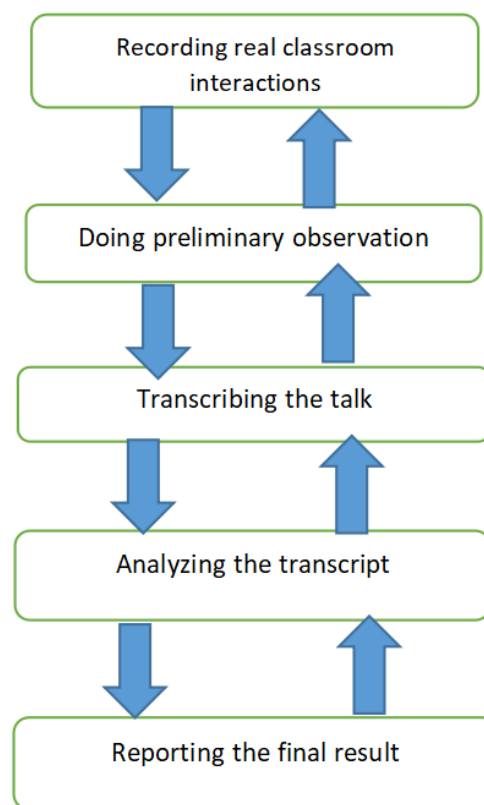

Figure 2. Plan of the research project (adapted for this research) [28,29].

The methodological framework given above and utilized in this study is inherently iterative and systematic, a characteristic visually encoded in the bidirectional flow of the design diagram in **Figure 2**. The downward vectors chart the essential procedural sequence, beginning with the systematic documentation of classroom interaction and concluding with the formal reporting of the derived findings. In contrast, the upward vectors mandate a necessary recursive step, indicating the requirement for continuous, periodic re-evaluation and cross-checking of the data to ensure analytical rigor.

The comprehensive data analysis was strictly predicated upon adherence to these methodological steps. To achieve data verification and contextual depth, the recorded classroom interaction data were systematically

cross-referenced with verbatim transcripts of face-to-face interviews with the participating ESL teachers. This triangulation provided essential explanatory narratives that further illuminated the genesis and characteristics of observed trouble sources during instructional episodes in the ESL environment.

3.2. Participants and Sampling

This study employed a purposive sampling strategy to investigate English as a Second Language (ESL) classroom discourse. The research context was confined to Senior High Schools (Forms 1–3) in the Upper East Region of Ghana. The specific instructional activities analysed included grammar, listening and speaking, comprehension, and composition, all of which align with Ghana's official English Language syllabus.

With respect to data sources and participants, the core sample was drawn exclusively from teachers and students actively engaged in ESL instruction, consistent with the research objective of examining trouble sources within ESL classroom interaction. The discourse data, the primary data source, comprised 52 h of audio-recorded classroom lessons. To complement the discourse analysis and account for unobservable factors influencing spoken interaction, 10 semi-structured interviews were conducted with the participating teachers. Although interviews are not a standard component of Conversation Analysis (CA) methodology, their inclusion was deemed necessary for comprehensive analysis [30,31].

The study involved approximately 1283 students, with an average class size of 35. Participant selection targeted individuals identified as upper-intermediate English users. This proficiency level was determined by leveraging existing school-based assessments and national examination results provided by the West African Examinations Council. This sample is considered representative of the typical language proficiency profile within Ghanaian Senior High School ESL contexts, thereby ensuring the ecological validity and contextual alignment of the findings with the study's aims.

3.3. Data Collection and Transcription Procedures

The research team employed a mixed-methods approach involving classroom observation and semi-structured

interviews. Two research assistants were recruited and subsequently underwent comprehensive training focused on standardized protocols for data collection and transcription. This training was essential for maintaining consistency and reliability across the study's procedures.

Concerning the classroom observation, the team adopted the role of non-participant observers, strategically positioning ourselves alongside the trained research assistants to capture both verbal and non-verbal classroom dynamics. The primary mode of data collection for the classroom discourse involved digital audio recording using Casio V6 recorders. Regarding non-verbal data, we utilized an observational checklist concurrently to systematically gather relevant non-verbal features, such as gestures and interaction patterns; this complemented the audio recordings.

To ensure a comprehensive and reliable account of the study, we conducted semi-structured face-to-face interviews with the ten (N = 10) most experienced ESL teachers (in terms of longevity in the teaching profession). All interviews were audio-recorded to ensure accurate capture of the qualitative data. Employing triangulation in our data collection helped to increase validity. Importantly, combining the direct experience of observation with the explanations from interviews resulted in a deeper, more nuanced understanding of the socio-cultural context, thereby giving credence to our findings.

Following each session, we engaged in a collaborative post-session procedure by comparing and cross-referencing observation notes and audio transcripts; this significantly enhanced the overall quality and fidelity of our transcripts.

3.4. Reliability and Validity

The study's robust methodological framework was systematically established by addressing both reliability and validity through thorough procedures. Reliability was ensured via adherence to rigorous methodological standards for classroom-based research. The primary data source was 52 h of naturally occurring, authentic interactions collected across 56 ESL instructional sessions over six months. Data collection utilized high-quality dual audio recordings and a discreet setup to mitigate the observer effect and preserve naturalism. Furthermore, transcription reliability was confirmed through a peer-review process, and the credibility of the findings was strengthened by external scrutiny via schol-

arly conference presentations. Validity was systematically addressed across three dimensions, namely, internal validity, ecological validity, and construct validity, as presented in **Table 1** below:

Table 1. Summary of Reliability and Validity Measures.

Dimension	Procedure
Internal Validity	Prioritized an emic perspective, focusing on participants' own interpretations to ensure findings accurately reflect the social reality of the classroom interactions.
Ecological Validity	Maintained by using unaltered, naturally recorded classroom interactions, confirming that observed phenomena were representative of real-world ESL contexts.
Construct Validity	Achieved through an inductive approach to categorize interactional phenomena (specifically repair types), deriving categories directly from participants' linguistic behavior rather than imposing a priori theoretical constructs.

Collectively, these systematic steps confirm the study's methodological rigor and the authenticity of its empirical foundation.

3.5. Ethical Considerations

The study complied with internationally recognised ethical standards for educational research and received ethical approval from the Takoradi Technical University Research and Ethics Committee (TTU/REC/EDU/024/2022). The Committee reviewed the study design, recruitment procedures, consent processes, and data protection measures prior to authorising data collection.

Institutional permission was obtained from school authorities before entering classrooms. Written informed consent was secured from participating teachers, and consent was obtained from schools on behalf of students, with age-appropriate assent sought from students themselves. All participants received an information sheet outlining the study purpose, procedures (including unobtrusive audio recording of naturally occurring lessons), potential risks and benefits, and their rights. Participation was voluntary, and participants could decline or withdraw at any time without penalty. Separate consent was obtained for audio recording.

To protect confidentiality, pseudonyms were used in transcripts, analyses, and reporting, and all identifying details were removed. Audio files, transcripts, and related materials were stored on password-protected computers with encrypted backups accessible only to the research team; physical documents were kept in locked cabinets. Data handling and storage followed TTU policy and international standards for privacy and secure archiving. These measures ensured transparency, voluntariness, anonymity, and data security throughout the research.

4. Results

The study investigated the sources of conversation breakdown in the ESL classroom in the Upper East Region of Ghana. The findings indicate that mispronunciation, inappropriate word choice, insufficient information, abrupt topic change, and incomplete information are the primary contributors to the classroom interactional breakdown. Each of these is exemplified and explicated below:

4.1. Mispronunciation

In this study's context, mispronunciation is defined as a learner's inaccurate articulation of a word that results in communicative disruption. Within the ESL classroom discourse, mispronunciation was a recurrent trouble source, frequently impeding mutual understanding and interrupting the flow of interaction. For instance, Excerpt 1, drawn from a Senior High School grammar lesson on descriptive adjectives, serves to illustrate this assertion/phenomenon.

Excerpt 1

1. ST1: red goat

2. T: do we have a goat that is red?

3. SS: (laughs)

4. T: yee: s... Abdullah.

5. ST3: big lane (.) /lein/

6. T: I can't hear you, big lane? (rising intonation) /lein/?

7. ST4: big land (.) /lænd/

8. T: big land, /lænd/ (giggles)

The above example points to a chiasmic interaction between phonological incompetence, mispronunciation, and classroom interaction. Specifically, an analysis of the above interaction reveals how and the extent to which a student's mispronunciation, such as substituting land /lænd/ with /lein/, disrupted the interactional flow between the teacher and the taught via the mispronunciation's impediment of the display of knowledge. The teacher's repair initiator, "I can't hear you," in this instance, focused on articulatory precision rather than simple volume, underscoring the link between phonetic/phonological competence and effective classroom participation.

While CA effectively details the turn-by-turn management of communication trouble, it offers limited insight into the broader linguistic and sociocultural causes of learner mispronunciation. To address this, an interview with an ESL teacher confirmed that mispronunciation, often characterized by low tone or unintelligible articulation, is frequently attributed to L1 interference and language anxiety.

As one teacher explained:

> *"You know we all come from different backgrounds with different languages; I speak Gruni, and some speak Kasem, Kusaal, and even Buli, so our pronunciation differs. Some people have heavy L1, so it affects their pronunciation because English is not their first language."* (T1, 2023)

Thus, the above expression from the teacher points to the fact that L1 phonological transfer significantly influences L2 production, a finding consistent with established literature in Second Language Acquisition (SLA)[32]. When L2 learners approximate unfamiliar English phonemes using their native language's phonology, the resulting mispronunciations can confuse interlocutors and disrupt the learning environment. These errors, if uncorrected, pose a risk of fossilization, thereby hindering long-term oral fluency and communicative competence.

The above finding has pedagogical implications. In particular, the findings necessitate that educators recognize mispronunciation as a complex signal reflecting both linguistic challenges and emotional states. Therefore, effective ESL instruction must incorporate inclusive and responsive pronunciation support designed to build both 'clear' speech and learner confidence.

4.2. Vagueness

Vagueness in discourse arises when an interlocutor employs expressions lacking sufficient semantic or pragmatic precision, thereby necessitating further clarification through additional detail[20]. Excerpt 2, taken from a summary-writing lesson in a girls' Senior High School, illustrates how such vagueness can surface in instructional discourse.

Excerpt 2

1. T: In those countries, animals are kept in pens, so most homes have pens.
    → pens↑

2. S5: → Sir, pens, animals in pen?
    ((furrowed brow, puzzled look))

3. S2: [Sir, this one?
    ((raises her writing pen, looks at teacher))

4. T: A place where we keep animals is also called a pen. We have pens for writing and pens where animals or pets are housed.
    ((points to the board while saying this))

5. ST: ((nods slowly, mouth slightly open))

6. T: Continue from paragraph four.

7. S4: Okay, sir.

Excerpt 2 highlights a common yet often overlooked source of interactional difficulty in ESL classrooms: vagueness arising from lexical ambiguity. In line 1, the teacher remarks, "In those countries, animals are kept in pens, so most homes have pens [↗]." The rising intonation (marked as [↗]), suggests an invitation for student engagement, directing attention to the ambiguous term, *pens*. This ambiguity immediately becomes a trouble source. S5 initiates repair by asking, "Sir, pens, animals in pen?", and S2 reinforces the misunderstanding by holding up a writing pen and asking, "Sir, this one?", a multimodal repair initiation indicating misalignment with the teacher's intended meaning. In line 4, the teacher resolves the ambiguity by distinguishing between the two senses of *pen*: "A place where we keep animals is also called a pen. We have pens for writing and pens where animals or pets are housed." From a conversation-analytic perspective, the trouble source here stems not from pronunciation or grammatical error but from semantic vagueness rooted in lexical polysemy.

4.3. Inappropriate Word

In this study, the use of inappropriate lexical items refers to instances in which interlocutors produced semantically or contextually mismatched words, leading to communication breakdown. As illustrated in Excerpt 3 below (drawn from a reading comprehension lesson), many of these breakdowns stemmed from limitations in the linguistic performance of both teachers and students.

Excerpt 3

1. T: Now, read Betty.

2. S: But soon our fears were awayed.
   → *awayed* (spoken clearly, with emphasis)

3. T: → Awayed?

4. S: → Awayed fears.
   ((glances at teacher, uncertain expression))

5. T: → Allayed fears, not awayed fears.

6. S: … allayed fears.

7. S: He told us that the victim was completely ripped out.
   ((continues reading, intonation flattens near "ripped out"))

8. T: → Rip out?

9. T: → It should be wiped out, wiped out.

10. S: Wiped out, because he walked for many hours without the much-needed rest.
    ((slight nod, resumes reading))

Excerpt 3, Line 2, features a lexical error where the student replaces the idiomatic phrase "allay fears" with the non-standard "away fears". This necessitates another-initiated repair from the teacher, signaled through a probing repetition of the student's inaccurate, non-standardized verb form: "awayed?"

The student, demonstrating limited lexical awareness, reiterates the original inaccurate phrase. The teacher then resolves the trouble source by providing the correct form, "allayed fear," employing repetition for emphasis and clarity. The teacher's subsequent interview answer,

The learners we teach in this school come from different backgrounds. For many of them, English is used exclusively in school, while their primary language of communication at home is their mother tongue or first language, which varies significantly across the class. Despite consistent efforts to encourage the exclusive use of English, instances of code-switching persist, with students occasionally borrowing words from their first language. During instruction, I focus strictly on teaching in English. However, I sometimes permit the use of local languages, but only when I understand the language being used. Enforcing the exclusive use of English throughout lessons often discourages participation; some students remain silent, while others misuse words when attempting to express themselves. (T4, 2023).

provides essential sociolinguistic context for this interactional trouble. She notes the students' diverse linguistic backgrounds and limited exposure to English outside the classroom, where their primary language is their respective mother tongue. This constrained exposure is suggested to result in a limited semantic repertoire and the use of inappropriate lexical items (e.g., "awayed" and "ripped out").

Furthermore, the teacher's account reveals a tension between institutional English-only policies and pedagogical reality. While English is the primary medium of instruction, the teacher strategically adopts a flexible or bilingual approach, occasionally permitting the use of local languages to maintain communicative flow and encouraging student participation, thereby acknowledging that strict enforcement of the language in education policy may lead to disengagement.

Thus, from a CA perspective, Excerpt 3 illustrates how the teacher manages conversational trouble rooted in semantic inaccuracy. The repair sequence demonstrates a balance between correction (by supplying the correct form) and scaffolding (by initially probing for self-correction). When triangulated with the interview data, the analysis underscores that the student's lexical errors are not isolated incidents but are embedded in wider sociolinguistic dynamics, specifically, unequal exposure to the target language and the complexities of institutional language policy versus actual classroom practice.

4.4. Insufficient Information

The study identified several trouble sources related to insufficient information, including a paucity of knowledge, limited semantic clarity, and a lack of elaboration. These issues often led to communication breakdowns in ESL classroom discourse, typically occurring when speakers provided less information than necessary, resulting in misunderstandings that required conversational repair to restore effective interaction. Excerpt 4 illustrates this through a teacher-led session and student presentation focused on the topic of 'active' and 'passive' voice.

Excerpt 4

1. T: Now, answer the questions.

2. S4: Sir, the question of A or B?

3. T: B (.1) we just went through A together. Were you not in class?

4. S2: Should we do it now or do (.) homework?

5. T: Take your comprehension exercise books, do the assignment now, assignment B! (in an angry tone)

The above excerpt entails instructional repair and deictic ambiguity. Particularly, we observe in Excerpt 4, a concise yet analytically rich segment of classroom interaction, revealing an immediate breakdown in instructional clarity due to the teacher's use of an insufficiently specified deictic reference.

The interaction commenced with the vague directive, "Now, answer the questions." The deictic phrase "the questions" served as a trouble source, lacking the necessary contextual referent for task orientation. This ambiguity prompted immediate learner-initiated other-repair, exemplified by S4's clarification request: "Sir, the question of A or B?"

The teacher's subsequent response, "B (.1) we just went through A together. Were you not in class?" successfully resolved the task referent ("B") but simultaneously introduced a subtle shift to a critique via the rhetorical challenge regarding the student's presence in the classroom. Further complicating the instructional frame, another student interjected, seeking clarification on task modality: "Should we do it now or do homework?"

The repair sequence concluded with the teacher issuing a highly specified but authoritative and irritated final directive: "Take your comprehension exercise books, do the assignment now, assignment B!" (delivered in an angry tone). While this move restored instructional clarity (specifying the book, timing, and task), it utilized a corrective-authoritative register that potentially impacted the affective climate and future learner participation.

This episode offers critical insights into instructional communication, particularly within ESL contexts. Vague directives such as "answer the questions" challenge the developing interpretive competence of language learners, underscoring the necessity for teachers to provide explicit referents and effective scaffolding between instructional phases. Crucially, the segment also demonstrates the active role of ESL learners in initiating repair to resolve task ambiguity, a significant, though often underappreciated, form of classroom participation.

4.5. Change of Topic

Change of topic in the ESL classroom lesson was a result of a misunderstanding among interlocutors, as shown in excerpt 5. Excerpt 5 was obtained from grammar lessons in an ESL classroom interaction.

Excerpt 5

1. T: Take it off.

2. S: Sir said, take it off?

3. T: So, it means you are not wearing something like this.

4. T: So what you are wearing is not the prescribed vest, so that means if they ask you to remove it, you don't have anything to wear.
    Mmmh (0.2)
    And that of your– this type of sandals you are wearing is not prescribed. Tomorrow, we shall seize them.

5. T: Tomorrow doesn't come with this.
    Alright, back to what we were talking about.
    I gave these two examples.
    One is a transitive verb, and one will be intransitive verb…

6. S: Sir, say the examples again?

7. T: I just mentioned the examples not long ago.

Excerpt 5 documents a significant disruption of peda-

gogical continuity in an ESL grammar lesson, resulting from a mismanaged shift from instructional to disciplinary talk. The sequence began with an abrupt, decontextualized directive from the teacher: "Take it off." This instruction, stemming from the teacher's immediate reaction to a student's non-compliant attire (an unprescribed vest), prompted a repair initiation from a student ("Sir said, take it off?"), signaling confusion due to the instructional ambiguity. The teacher then elaborated on the student's clothing non-compliance (vest and sandals), effectively shifting the interactional frame from grammar instruction to behavioral correction over multiple turns. An attempted return to the lesson ("Alright, back to what we were talking about. I gave these two examples...") lacked any instructional recap or scaffolding, leading to a breakdown in coherence. A student subsequently requested clarification ("Sir, say the examples again?"), which the teacher met with frustration, citing recent provision ("I just mentioned the examples not long ago"), failing to acknowledge the cognitive and affective disruption caused by the prior intervention.

Triangulation with the accompanying teacher interview data provides critical insight into the episode's affective dimensions. First, we observe reflexive acknowledgment whereby the teacher later admitted an initial emotional reaction followed by a shift to a more compassionate understanding: "Initially, I was upset to see her wearing improper in the classroom, but I realised that her zip had a defect." Second, we see a social-emotional impact of the interactional exchange with the teacher, recognizing the negative social and emotional consequences of the public correction: "Yes, the students, all the students were looking at her; she might have felt bad and may not concentrate on the lesson again, likewise others." This underscores the immediate detrimental impact of the public disciplinary intervention on the student's focus and that of their peers.

Finally, we observe a professional reflection by the teacher's conclusion, where she noted,

> "*Yes, the students, all the students were looking at her; she might have felt bad and may not concentrate on the lesson again, likewise others. I think I should have waited after the lesson to end before confronting her*"

signaling an important moment of professional reflexivity and pedagogically responsive teaching.

From a CA perspective, Excerpt 5 illustrates a mismanaged topic shift [33] where the transition between activity types (disciplinary to instructional talk) was neither pre-sequenced nor interactionally accounted for. The student's subsequent request, "Say the examples again?", functions not as a display of inattention, but as a crucial bid for re-entry into the learning space following the teacher's disruptive disciplinary intervention. The episode highlights how spontaneous, public correction can derail instructional focus and negatively influence the social-emotional climate essential for effective ESL learning. From a CA perspective, such markers publicly account for the shift in activity type, project the temporary nature of the interruption, and facilitate students' re-alignment to the pedagogical task, thereby reducing interactional disruption and supporting affectively sensitive classroom management.

4.6. Statement of Incomplete Information

Excerpt 6 was drawn from a teacher-led discussion on composition and expository writing on negative social issues in Ghana. The ESL teacher adopted a structured discussion focusing on five social vices, namely illegal mining, prostitution, armed robbery, corruption, and careless driving. He introduced the lesson by instructing the students to write down some of the things they think affect society and proceeded to interrogate what the students wrote. A specific instance of a statement that gives incomplete information that could result in a conversation breakdown was observed during this lesson in the teacher's and student exchanges. This is captured in excerpt 6 below.

Excerpt 6

1. T: Today we are discussing some social vice. We will brainstorm the social vices in Ghana, and then write an expository essay. Social vices are undesirable behaviours or activities that have a negative impact on society. These vices are generally considered harmful, immoral, or illegal and are detrimental to the well-being and progress of individuals and communities. Now, what are some of the social vices in Ghana?

2. S1: Smoking.

3. T: ((cupping hand behind ear)) Smoking of what?

4. S2: Smoking of weed, cigarette, tobacco.

5. T: Any other?

6. S3: Illegal mining, sakawa.

7. T: Internet fraud, not sakawa.

8. S1: Prostitution, armed robbery, and careless driving.

9. T: Now, we are going to discuss further on them, one by one. Why are they social vices?

Excerpt 6 presents a segment from an ESL classroom in which the teacher guides students through a brainstorming task on the topic of 'social vices in Ghana'. The Excerpt illustrates how ESL classroom interaction can surface subtle trouble sources, particularly underspecified learner responses and lexical misalignment. When a student offers the vague term *"smoking"*, the teacher initiates elaboration through a combination of verbal repair and non-verbal prompting, leading to a peer-constructed clarification. This underscores how repair sequences can scaffold learner contributions and promote shared meaning-making. The teacher further addresses lexical appropriateness when a student uses the culturally embedded term *"sakawa"*, reformulating it as *"internet fraud"*. This subtle lexical repair bridges local discourse and academic English, guiding students toward register-appropriate language without dismissing their input.

5. Discussion and Limitations of the Study

This study, framed within CA, investigated the management of conversational trouble sources in ESL classroom discourse within the Upper East Region of Ghana, yielding a refined typology of conversational breakdowns. The three most important points revealed in the studied data and the elucidations provided in the above sections include: mishearing and L1 phonological transfer, expanding the typology of trouble sources, and non-linguistic and institutional trouble sources.

Regarding mishearing and L1 phonological transfer, the research confirms the centrality of mishearing, predominantly caused by mispronunciation, as a major trouble source, consistent with foundational CA tenets prioritizing sequential organization and mutual intelligibility [12,22,25]. This discovery supports existing repair studies, which link mispronunciation in L2 interaction to L1 phonological transfer. The multiethnic composition of the Ghanaian classrooms studied

results in significant divergence between students' phonological systems and English, leading to breakdowns. Within the CA framework, these L1-influenced mispronunciations constitute identifiable trouble sources that trigger collaborative repair sequences, such as clarification requests [14,19,34,35].

On expanding the typology of trouble sources, this study significantly contributes to the literature by isolating vagueness, specifically lexical ambiguity in teacher talk, as a distinct and underexplored trouble source. While prior CA research on L2 repair has generally categorized trouble broadly (e.g., pronunciation, grammar), this analysis highlights how polysemantic words (words with different meanings/senses) can impede discourse progress by increasing cognitive load.

Vagueness was also identified as leading to the production of repairable and repair initiation. For example, Excerpt 2 showed how the teacher's use of "pen" (intended as an animal enclosure) caused confusion due to students' association with the more common meaning (a writing tool). Students initiated repair using both verbal and non-verbal/embodied cues (e.g., raising a pen, puzzled look), underscoring the critical role of multimodal signals in interactional signalling, a detail often overlooked in studies focusing strictly on verbal data.

Also discovered is how and the extent to which inappropriate lexical or expression/phrase choice created a trouble source. In particular, lexical errors, such as a student's non-existent verb "awayed" instead of "allayed," or the phrase "ripped out" for "wiped out," exemplify lexical approximation common among L2 learners with limited formal vocabulary exposure [7,10,13,21,33,36]. Such erroneousness threatens intersubjectivity, requiring immediate resolution to maintain coherence. These sequences parallel classic CA findings, confirming that institutional talk shares core discourse mechanisms with everyday conversation when addressing trouble. The teacher interview data attributes this to the multilingual environment and insufficient English exposure outside of school, leading to the misuse of words.

With respect to *non-linguistic and institutional trouble sources*, the findings broaden the definition of trouble to include procedural ambiguity and institutional conflict, which subtly, but significantly, disrupt learning. On procedural ambiguity, we observed in Excerpt 4 that the trouble was instructional, stemming from unclear directives: "Sir, the question of A or B?" and "Should we do it now or do home-

work?" This misalignment in task framing of non-linguistic error is an underrepresented type of trouble. The teacher's mildly confrontational tone in the expression "Were you not in class?" further added an affective dimension to the procedural trouble.

Regarding *institutional conflict*, Excerpt 5 demonstrated how non-linguistic institutional norms (e.g., uniform violations) can interrupt pedagogical flow, temporarily displacing the lesson agenda. This supports the view that classroom interaction involves multiple layers of agenda, where behavioral management inadvertently causes pedagogical disorientation.

On the *statement of incomplete information*, we observed in Excerpt 6 that cultural-linguistic mismatches could constitute trouble. Specifically, trouble arose from culturally specific vocabulary (e.g., "Sakawa"), highlighting that language socialization involves learning culturally and institutionally acceptable terminologies, the absence of which can generate misunderstanding or exclusion. This study's novelty, therefore, lies in framing trouble as an ecological construct, shaped by individual competence, institutional norms, social expectations, and language ideologies.

The study faced such limitations as teachers having the tendency to present themselves favourably, students' lack of control over factors such as topical knowledge and cultural background, and the possible influence of teachers knowing their speech was recorded. Additionally, the research was conducted only in Ghana's Upper East region due to resource constraints, limiting the generalisability of the findings. However, the theoretical and methodological orientations employed as well as the explications of the cited excerpts, and the results sometimes presenting novel ideas and constructs or aligning with facts obtained in the pertinent literature, mitigate the negative impact of the above-mentioned limitations.

6. Conclusions

This research is a pioneering contribution to the study of conversational repair practices in Ghanaian Senior High School ESL classrooms, a previously underexplored area. By adopting a pedagogical ethnographic perspective, the study has provided empirical evidence on how teachers and students manage discourse breakdowns to sustain communication and enhance teaching effectiveness in the Ghanaian context.

Important conclusions drawn from the study include: (a) mispronunciation being a significant interactional trouble source shaped by linguistic diversity and influence, underscoring the need for pedagogical strategies that foster intelligibility and inclusive participation; (b) trouble sources being multifaceted, extending beyond traditional linguistic errors (e.g., pronunciation, grammar) to include instructional ambiguity, procedural misunderstandings, and socio-cultural vocabulary use; (c) the possibility of institutional expectations such as disciplinary interventions like uniform enforcement, lending themselves to generate trouble by interrupting pedagogy and causing confusion; and (d) cultural-linguistic mismatches highlighting that language learning involves acquiring both grammatical accuracy and culturally legitimate vocabulary.

In sum, this investigation serves as a foundational contribution to educational linguistics, although the findings' generalizability is limited by the scope of the study (Upper East region only) and the potential influence of the observation method.

Author Contributions

Funding

Institutional Review Board Statement

The study complied with internationally recognised ethical standards for educational research and received ethical approval from the Takoradi Technical University Research and Ethics Committee (TTU/REC/EDU/024/2022).

Informed Consent Statement

Institutional permission was obtained from school authorities before entering classrooms. Written informed consent was secured from participating teachers, and consent was obtained from schools on behalf of students, with age-appropriate assent sought from students themselves. All participants received an information sheet outlining the study purpose, procedures (including unobtrusive audio recording of naturally occurring lessons), potential risks and benefits, and their rights. Participation was voluntary, and participants could decline or withdraw at any time without penalty. Separate consent was obtained for audio recording.

Data Availability Statement

The datasets generated during and/or analyzed during the current study are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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