

Full Length Research

Barriers to Code Switching in English Second Language medium classrooms

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Code switching was prevalent in the Namibian communities; however, teachers were reluctant to use it in their English Second Language classrooms even when their learners failed to understand what they were saying. This paper therefore, was set to find out why teachers were not embracing code switching in English medium classrooms. The objective of this study was to find the barriers to code switching in English medium classrooms. The mixed method design was used for this study, using both quantitative and qualitative methods. When the effects of Code Switching were talked about, both numbers and words were used to persuade the Grade 10 ESL language teachers to give a vivid picture about the language of instruction situation in the Namibian schools. The questionnaire and observation checklist were the two research instruments that were used to collect data in this study. The study investigated 12 teachers at 12 schools in the Caprivi Education Region. Both teachers and politicians' attitudes were seen to be the barriers to the use of Code switching in the Namibian English Second Language classrooms. There was a need to conduct a study that would investigate whether the use of Code Switching reflects language deficiency on the speaker.

Keywords: medium of instruction, English Second Language, code switching.

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INTRODUCTION

The issue of language is not restricted to learners only; but it is also a problem for teachers. Moodley (2014, p. 54) quotes Nelson Mandela who once said that "If you talk to a man in a language he understands, that goes to his head. If you talk to him in his language that goes to his heart". Kalong (2008) maintains that many teachers,

especially those who are in favour of the applications of the communicative techniques in the classroom environments, are against the use of any mother tongue or Code Switching in the classroom.

One reason why monolingual teaching has been so readily accepted is due to the 'language myths of

Europeans', and the belief in their inherent superiority over non-European languages (Pennycook, 1994). Notably so, the stigma of Code Switching in the English Second Language context originates from the ardent belief in the importance of the English language and the disrespect shown towards other languages (Pennycook, 1994). Weschler (1997) argues that English only came about through the blind acceptance of certain theories, which served the interests of native speaking teachers.

According to Clegg (2007), stakeholders in African education, especially governments and educational development agencies, need to be informed about the pros and cons of the choice of a medium of instruction. Clegg (2007) and Wolff (2006) note that governments and other institutions in the education service tend to be ill-informed about the role of languages in learning and about the choice of language medium.

Lack of knowledge about the medium of instructions amongst governments, parents and teachers in schools prevents teachers from using Code Switching in super-comprehensible ways such as repetition. Some teachers have shown a lack of understanding of the policy on medium of instruction in schools, and because of that, they tend to impose the English medium of instruction even when learners do not understand, when they could have given extra emphasis to CALP in both first language and second language (Cummins, 2000). In addition, there appears to be a stigma attached to Code Switching by teachers, parents and learners. Venzke (2002, p. 67) quotes a lecturer at a black training college in South Africa who said; "Students or pupils fail to understand the subject matter clearly because the teacher cannot explain or express himself effectively. Take for instance a science teacher with all the necessary information becoming frustrated in front of his class as a result of his inadequacy in language use". To avoid teaching that results in little or no understanding of the content, innovative teachers code switch when a need arises. However, Code Switching is often considered inappropriate by those that are in authority in schools.

There are also misconceptions about Code Switching, such as those noted by Duran (1994), who maintains that the use of Code Switching and the mixing of languages are considered ill-mannered, show off, ignorant, aggressive and show pride through the eyes of other speakers. In addition, Duran (1994) argues that Code Switching can cause a speaker to feel demotivated and self-conscious as he or she will be considered as less fluent, less intelligent and less expressive when he or she code switches from the English language to another language.

Venzke (2002) maintains that both teachers and learners feel constrained by the fact that learners are evaluated largely on the basis of their written work in the English language. The learners' chances of success, therefore, become very slim if their language deviates

from the standard norms, because the examiner may not be able to comprehend what they are trying to convey in any language other than the English language.

The English Language Teacher Development Project (ELTDP) (2000) reports that large numbers of Namibian teachers across all phases are falling below an acceptable level of using English to convey the meaning of language items and subject-related concepts. Wolfaardt (2001) and the ELTDP (2000) are also in agreement that the English proficiency of Namibian teachers is so low that they have to revert to using mother tongue to explain concepts to learners that are not understood in English. The ELTDP (2000) further reports that due to poor elicitation skills by Namibian teachers, they are likely to be unable to give the learners the needed opportunity to use the English language to articulate the concepts they are learning. Often the specialized vocabulary does not exist in the mother tongue or the teacher does not understand that specialized vocabulary.

Despite the views given above that Code Switching is at times used because of both teachers and learners' poor language proficiency, it should be noted here that a person who code switches demonstrates more linguistic creativity and sophistication than the one who speaks only one language. The use of Code Switching in the classroom reflects social reality. In real life Code Switching is prevalent in most talks, therefore, if society outside the classrooms code switches why should schools regard the use of mother tongue unacceptable? Learners learn to communicate with the community around them and the English language is just one of the tools of communicating ideas just like any other language. Bennett and Dunne (2002) argue that learners do not learn isolated facts and theories in some abstract ethereal land of the mind separated from the rest of their lives: they learn in relationship to what else they know, what they believe, their prejudices and their fears. On reflection, it becomes evident that this point is actually a corollary of the idea that learning is an active and social event. We cannot therefore divorce our learning from our lives.

There are also other barriers to the use of Code Switching in classrooms as described by Poplack (1980, p. 586):

i. Equivalence constraint

- According to this constraint, Code Switching happens when there are two languages sharing a similar word.
- This constraint limits Code Switching between typologically distant languages such as English and Japanese. The word order in English is Subject-Verb-Object while the

Japanese's word order is Subject-Object-Verb.

ii. Free Morpheme Constraint

- Codes may be switched after any constituent in discourse provided that the constituent is not a bound morpheme.
- The bound morpheme barrier limits the switch between a lexical item and a bound morpheme except the previous one has been included phonologically into the language that is being currently used.

Brock-Utne (2002, p. 1) highlights three fallacies that are often heard in discussions about the languages of instruction in Africa. The fallacies are:

- To get a good job one needs a good command of the European languages.
- Most of the African languages have not yet developed the scientific terminology needed in modern advanced society.
- There is a high cost of translating materials into African languages.

According to Bennett and Dunne (2002), during classroom instruction, the emphasis should not be on the language being used, but a language should be used as an instrument of learning. Once the learner has developed new understanding he or she needs to reflect and exchange ideas and views with other learners and the teacher in order to consolidate his or her learning. Classroom talk, be it in the mother tongue, or the English language, or Code Switching, indicates to the teacher the state of the learners' understanding.

It is not possible to assimilate new knowledge without having some structure developed from previous knowledge to build on. The more we know, the more we can learn. Therefore, any effort to teach should be connected to the learner's previous knowledge in order to provide a path into the new knowledge. Learners' mother tongue in the English medium classroom should be used as a path to learning the target language. In the case of Namibia, where government advocates for the English language, switching between the mother tongue and the English language should be used as a resource to aid the learning of the target language.

Delpit and Dowdy (2001) argue that if schools consider someone's language inadequate, schools will probably fail. In agreement with Delpit and Dowdy, is Brock-Utne (1992) who characterizes denying the right of learners to use the language in which they are most familiar as medium of instruction as linguistic oppression, a type of violence akin to Bourdieu and Passeron's (1977) notion of symbolic violence. In other words, when schools or

education systems impose a language on learners, they are complicit in symbolic violence and the process of confirming and reproducing power relations. What can happen is that learners may feel threatened and may withdraw from participating in learning, thereby defeating the purpose of schooling.

The problem of teachers' low English proficiency cannot be denied in certain instances, but this does not necessarily mean that every teacher who code switches has low English language proficiency. Teachers with low English proficiency can also employ other teaching strategies that facilitate learning because learning does not entirely depend on Code Switching.

METHODOLOGY

Prior to the actual study, the questionnaire was piloted; colleagues approved the reliability of the instrument. The pilot schools had the same characteristics as those which participated in the final study. To achieve the desired results, the research instruments had to be refined after they had been piloted. To ensure that the study produced the desired results, triangulation was used. According to Mathison (1988, p. 13), "triangulation has raised an important methodological issue in naturalistic and qualitative approaches to evaluation [in order to] control bias and establishing valid propositions because traditional scientific techniques are incompatible with this alternate epistemology". The population of this study consisted of Grade 10 ESL teachers in the Caprivi Education Region. All teachers in the Caprivi Education Region that taught Grade 10 ESL classes formed the population of this study. Purposeful sampling also called criterion sampling was used. Purposeful sampling is based on the assumption that one wants to discover, understand, and gain insight about his/her sample. Therefore, one needs to select a sample from which one can learn (Chein, 1981 as cited in Sharan, 1998). Sharan (1998) says that purposeful sampling is also called criterion sampling, where the researcher establishes the criteria, or standards necessary for units to be included in the investigation, and then the researcher finds a sample that matches these criteria.

Two research instruments were used to collect data in this study. These were questionnaires and observation checklists. The questionnaire focused on the perceptions of teachers on the use of code switching in English medium classrooms, while the observation checklist assessed the use of language in teaching. The analysis of questionnaires and observation checklist were coded and categorised. Sub-categories were established and grouped together as themes. Once themes were identified, they were again coded with numbers and analysed by Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS). In addition, content analysis was used to group

Table 1. Barriers to Code Switching in Grade 10 English medium classrooms

Respondents	Responses
A2	The medium of instruction is English, no Code Switching, explanations are written in English not mother tongue. Employment needs people who can express themselves in English.
A3	Learners should get used to English; therefore teachers should find alternative ways of explaining things to learners in English instead of Code Switching.
A4	The school rules, the fact that every learner should use English does not create room for utterances in the mother tongue; policy on subjects, mostly are written in English, so learners use English inside and outside the classrooms.
A6	Learners do not understand concepts in English, at times learners do not understand instructions said in English.
A7	Learners are shy to speak in class; at times learners say English words with their mother tongue influence "pronunciation".
A8	Spelling when some fail to write the correct spelling of the words in English, they will end up writing it in Silozi.
A10	Inability to read, speak and write- lack of vocabulary and reading skills forces learners to consider Code Switching; In exposure/in informed- not oriented are of things happening (contemporary) that could acquire in primary (poor foundation/background).
A11	Misconceptions about not giving jobs.

responses from interviews and the observation checklist into themes and categories to determine the meaning of the participants' views and practices towards Code Switching.

RESULTS

Table 1 presents the responses by ESL teachers as to what they perceived as barriers to Code Switching in Grade 10 English medium classrooms.

There was an equal split in teachers' responses; four seemed not to have understood the question very well, judging from the responses that they gave. Nevertheless, the four who understood the question listed the following as barriers to Code Switching: the language

policy, school rules, lack of vocabulary in the mother tongue and misconception about job opportunities. However, the four respondents were against Code Switching.

DISCUSSION

Barriers to Code Switching

There are many factors that prevent teachers from using Code Switching in their classrooms and some of them are discussed below.

Educators' attitudes

In Table 1 various responses were given by ESL

teachers regarding the use of Code Switching. Four respondents were receptive while another four were hostile towards Code Switching. The four who were receptive towards Code Switching listed the following as barriers to Code Switching: the language policy, school rules, lack of vocabulary in the mother tongue and misconception about job opportunities.

The four ESL teachers who were unwelcoming towards Code Switching appeared to be either unreceptive to the idea, or did not tolerate the learners' Code Switching. The ESL teachers were unfriendly towards a pedagogical technique that might have positive results on teaching and learning and greatly influenced by their attitude towards Code Switching. Lin (1996) notes that the teachers' unwelcoming attitude towards Code Switching is influenced by the perception that Code Switching is viewed to be of lower status, a strategy used by weak language performers to compensate for language deficiencies. However, as Lin further notes, this view about Code Switching and bilingual talk in general is more normatively-based than research-based. According to Lin, such views convey little more than the speaker or writer's normative claims about what counts as standard or legitimate language.

Educators are therefore urged to examine their attitudes towards Code Switching because in the true sense their attitudes have nothing to do with pedagogy. Code switching in the classroom is natural, especially in a bilingual situation, and that the ability for one to move from one language to another is highly desirable among learners. Setatiet *al.* (2002) in a study of science classrooms in South Africa found that the use of learners' mother tongue was a powerful means for learners to explore their ideas. They argued that without the use of Code Switching, some learners' alternate conceptions would remain unexposed (Rollnick and Rutherford, 1996 in Setatiet *al.* 2002).

Of particular interest in this study was the observation that teachers in the rural areas were not willing to code switch, despite the fact that the English language proficiency of their rural learners was poor, compared to their peers in urban schools, whose proficiency in English was much better. Yet, it was the urban teachers who inclined to code switch in their classrooms. The reluctance of rural teachers to code switch in the English medium classrooms in the presence of an outsider could be attributed to insecurity and attitude, teachers felt that they might be seen to be incompetent or that their English proficiency was low, while the urban teachers seemed to have transcended the issue of insecurity. The rural teachers' attitude towards Code Switching is explained by Moodley (2014) who says that the use of Code Switching in formal situations, particularly in the classroom, is generally looked down by teachers.

It can also be argued here that Code Switching in the classroom is a "legitimate strategy" (Cook, 2001, p.105)

and no matter how it might be disruptive during a conversation to the listener, it still provides an opportunity for language development (Skiba, 1997). However, historically, strong stigmatic belief about Code Switching existed in many countries, which made Ferguson (2003) to conclude that ideological and conceptual sources of suspicion might all too often be attached to classroom Code Switching, suggesting that deep rooted attitudes may not be easy to change. Code Switching is more than an attitude, but a strategy to solve communicative challenges.

Political leaders' attitudes towards Code Switching

Many African leaders subscribe to the idea that African languages cannot be used as medium of instruction in schools. In the Namibian context, the politicians' choice of English is deeply rooted in historical circumstances, educational choices and second language provisions in the Namibian schools. These choices have negatively affected the choice of a medium of instruction in an independent Namibia, where the use of the mother tongue in schools is treated with suspicion despite the poor examination results that result from the use of English as the sole medium of instruction. The negative attitude towards Code Switching is best described by Moodley (2014, p. 61) who argues that "when the matrix language is English, the co-occurrence of English with another language is frequently viewed as 'sub-standard' language behaviour and teachers seldom feel at ease with this phenomenon in the classroom, on the other hand, when the matrix language is an indigenous language, and the guest language is English, speakers tend to feel 'superior' or 'knowledgeable' in their display of English. In his contribution to the discussion on mother tongue, Hameso (1997, p. 2) argues that to be liberated is when an individual can use his/her language for education and business, and that language performs different functions including a means of communication, expression and conceptualization. It is the latter aspect that brings the issue of language to the centre stage, and that is partly our concern here. Once the functions and importance of languages are recognized, the choice of languages of education is often made on historical, political (nationalistic) and cultural grounds as much as on the basis of pedagogical and linguistic ones

Incompatible policies and lack of clarity in policy documents

The aim of the Namibian government at independence was to unite Namibians through the use of English as medium of instruction in schools and curtail the relationship with Afrikaans. The use of English as

medium of instruction in schools at independence could have been necessary, as Schemied (1991) notes that in Africa and Namibia in particular the process of nation building was crucial. However, it is high time that education policies are harmonised, because if not done, educators can easily use this incompatible policies to implement classroom practices that are detrimental to learning and academic achievement. Makoshi (2014) argues that institutions often have official regulations that strongly prohibit the use of L1 in English as the second language or Foreign medium classrooms. In addition, Zhang, (2013, p. 2) maintains that "policy-makers promote 'English only' in schools and universities without any strong empirical evidence for it".

Inability of teachers to critically examine policies

Namibian teachers are occupied with completing the syllabus and preparing learners for examinations. Therefore, many a times they do not have the time to critically revisit existing policies. It is high time that those who are tasked to draft education policies, critically revisit policies to enable teachers to implement them correctly. According to Shohamy (2006), teachers are change agents; however, they implement these policies without questioning their quality, appropriateness and relevance to the learners. This notion of acceptance and implementing language policies without questioning their effectiveness and relatedness to learners' preference echoes Lin's (1996) sentiment that the view of the bilingual talk in general is more normatively-based than research-based. Simon (2001, p. 339), on the other hand, calls teachers and learners to reconsider the role that Code Switching plays in the classroom interaction and to "break with the methodologically imposed code constraints in order to use Code Switching strategically to achieve their pedagogical aims."

CONCLUSION

The study found that most Namibian teachers and politicians still subscribe to the idea that African languages cannot be used as medium of instruction in schools. Teachers fear that if mother tongue is used in the classrooms, learners might not be able to be employed and mother tongue might find its way in their writing. It was found that both educators and politicians' attitudes were the main barriers to the use of Code Switching in the Namibian English Second Language medium classrooms. Research should be conducted to investigate whether the use of Code Switching is a reflection of language deficiency of the speaker.

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