

The Impact of Code Switching on Learners' Participation during Classroom Practice

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Abstract

The objective of this qualitative case study is to investigate whether the use of mother tongue in English medium classrooms can enhance classroom participation. Questionnaire, interviews and observation were the two research instruments that were used to collect data in this study. The study investigated 12 ESL teachers at 12 schools in the Zambezi Educational Region. The study revealed that the use of mother tongue in English medium classrooms did not constrain learners' understanding of the learning content; it rather seemed to facilitate classroom participation. The findings revealed that Grade 10 ESL teachers agreed that Code Switching benefited learners' participation in English medium classrooms.

Keywords

code switching, language of instruction, classroom practice

1. Introduction

Generally there has been a high failure rate of Grade 10 learners in the year-end examinations in the Zambezi Educational Region of Namibia. This study set out to learn from English Second Language (ESL) teachers on how code switching impacted learners' participation during classroom practice.

2. Literature Review

Comprehensive and comprehensible input is mandatory for a learner to learn effectively in the classroom, and if learners do not understand the language the teacher uses, she/he simply cannot learn the subject matter effectively. Broke-Utne (2000) quotes Osaki (1991) as having said the following after observing a science class where English only was the medium of instruction:

Students either talk very little in class or copy textual information from the chalkboard, or attempt discussion in a mixed language (i.e., English and Kiswahili) and then copy notes on the chalkboard in English ... teachers who insist on using English only end up talking to themselves with very little student input.

Policy makers should be made aware of the two different dimensions of classroom talk when dealing with issues of language of instruction for schools, namely:

1) *The exploratory talk* which is such a necessary part of talking to learn and which is likely to be most effective in the learners' main languages because learners need to feel at ease when they are exploring ideas (Barnes, 1992).

2) *The discourse-specific talk* is part of learners' apprenticeship into the discourse genre of subjects in the school curriculum (Wells, 1992).

Grosjean (1985) in Setati, Adler, Reed and Bapoo (2002, p. 11) have described code switching as the coexistence and constant interaction of two languages in the bilingual which has produced a different but complete language system. An analogy comes from the domain of athletics. The high hurdler blends two types of competencies: that of high jumping and that of sprinting. When compared individually with the sprinter or the high jumper, the high hurdler meets neither level of competence, and yet when taken as a whole, the high hurdler is an athlete in his or her own right. No expert in track field would ever compare a high hurdler to a sprinter or to a high jumper, even though the former blends certain characteristics of the latter two. In many ways the bilingual learner is like the high hurdler. Therefore, the teacher could employ code switching to draw the learners' attention to new knowledge which could then be transferred into the medium of instruction. Eldridge's (1996) assumption is that code switching seems to be a natural and purposeful phenomenon which facilitates both communication and learning. Jernudd (2002) argues that individuals accomplish adequate communication quite happily through participation in communicative interaction that is meaningful to them.

Zabrodsckaja (2007) notes that in an academic sphere, bilingual pedagogical practices can help learners overcome communication barriers in their classroom environment, a scenario which Namibia could also employ. Huerta-Macias and Quintero (1992) propose that code switching should be viewed as part of a whole approach in bilingual contexts. According to Aichum (2003), Huerta-Macias (1992), Zabrodsckaja (2007), Moore (2002), Gabusi (2005) and Brock-Utne (2002), code switching is an essential tool in the classroom for both teachers and learners, who use a second language as a medium of instruction as it allows both teachers and learners to negotiate meaning; it thus facilitates interaction between the teacher and learners and between the learners themselves.

Brock-Utne (2002) argues that if African languages are used as media of instruction in science, it may eliminate the great barrier that exists between the privileged English classes and the ordinary people. Moore (2002) suggests that similar switches trigger divergent interactive treatments; therefore, code switching can help bridge the gap in the discourse. Jernudd (2002) maintains that a democratic society should strive to give all learners the opportunity of equal access to information and to participation in political process. He continues that educational language selection policy and practice should reflect that value (Jernudd, 2002).

Namibia is a multilingual country with English being the official language and the medium of instruction in schools; therefore, to support the principles of learning and teaching embedded in the Namibian curriculum, code switching practices are not only inevitable but necessary in schools where

the English language is being learned at the same time as being used as medium of instruction. Code switching is a language practice that supports classroom communication and it is a useful tool in learning and teaching in the Namibian context.

3. Methodology

The population of this qualitative case study consisted of Grade 10 ESL teachers in the Zambezi Educational Region of Namibia. All teachers in the Zambezi Educational Region that taught Grade 10 ESL classes formed the population of this study. Purposeful sampling was used to obtain the sample. Three research tools were used to collect data in this study. These were questionnaires, interviews and observations. The questionnaires and interviews focused on the perceptions of teachers on the use of code switching in English medium classrooms, while the observation checklist assessed the real-time use of language in teaching.

The analysis of the questionnaire items and the observation checklist were coded and categorised. Sub-categories were established and grouped together as themes. In addition, content analysis was used to group responses from interviews and the observation checklist into themes and categories to determine the meaning of the participants' views and practices towards code switching.

4. Findings

4.1 The Presence of Code Switching in English Medium Classrooms

Table 1 below gives the responses of the teachers on the above item.

As can be seen in Table 1, nine ESL teachers indicated that the code switching phenomenon was present in their classrooms and that they, along with their learners, code switched. Only one teacher claimed that code switching was not present in his English medium classroom. Two stated that they did not employ code switching at all in their classrooms. Although nine teachers agreed that they code switched in their teaching, only three agreed that there were terminologies in the mother tongue to justify code switching, while six felt that the mother tongue did not have sufficient terminologies to support code switching from mother tongue to English. Three did not respond to the question (see Table 1). **Seven teachers agreed that code switching improved learners' participation in their classrooms, while four disagreed.**

Table 1. How Teachers Handled Learners Who Code Switched

Respondents	Responses
A2	Warn the learner that he/she should not repeat the same mistakes. Help the learner with the English word from the mother tongue.
A3	Sometimes I cut him/her off before finishing and remind him/her to use English.
A4	Though on several occasions, I at times stop the learner immediately to avoid the

	use of the mother tongue or I correct the learner, meaning I tell him/her what he/she was supposed to say.
A5	I correct the mistake immediately.
A6	Yes, I have to explain to the learner the correct wording in English and alert the learners to use English or explain the word(s) to the learner, often I use contextual clues.
A7	I accepted the answer and let the same learner try and explain or look for an English equivalent word.
A8	I interrupted and instructed everyone to use English always in an English class unless otherwise.
A10	Encourage learners to communicate in English, motivate and show the need and benefits of practicing the English language.
A11	Not angry but cohesively let them defend their answers.
A12	Encourages learners to use English unless otherwise.

4.2 English Language and Code Switching on Learners' Participation in the Classroom

Responding to the question whether the use of English only in the classroom could affect learners' participation in the classroom, three of the ten teachers said that English as the only medium of instruction did not have a negative effect on learners' participation in the classroom. Three indicated that it did, and one said she/he was not sure. The responses of the teachers are given in Table 2.

Table 2. The Effects of ESL and Code Switching on Learners' Participation

Responses	Number	
	English only	Code Switching between English and mother tongue
Yes	3	6
No	6	5
Not sure	1	1
Total	10	12

However, when applying the same question to code switching, more teachers in the sample (6 out of twelve) said that code switching had positive effects on learners' participation; five indicated otherwise. Comments made by the ESL teachers regarding the learners who started answering questions in English and then switched to the mother tongue to complete their answers are presented in Table 3.

Table 3. Teachers' Reaction When Learners Code Switched

Respondents	Responses
A2	I will tell him/her not to combine the two languages at the same time.
A3	Let him/her finish and ask him/her later to try and translate that part he/she said in the mother tongue in English.
A4	Though annoying, I will let the learner finish with whatever she/he is saying, then ask any learner to say what has been said by the fellow learner in English.
A5	As a teacher I shall just help the learner or correct him/her to do the right thing.
A6	Encourage the learners to use the correct wording in English for example explaining that which is he/she said in the mother tongue in English.
A7	It will always give a chance to that specific learner to try and give the same answer in English.
A8	Emphasis must be given to learners not to combine the two languages, if it's English it must be English no matter whether learners do not understand through the medium of the English language.
A10	Very uncomfortable and the learners would not be allowed to finish the sentence in the mother tongue but would ask the learner to answer in English as we all know that practice makes perfect.
A11	To handle it professionally.
A12	I will not be happy with learners through Code Switching may be good; learners should express themselves in the target languages as far as possible.

The responses of ESL teachers differed from teacher to teacher. However, five said that they stopped the learner immediately and warned the learner to only use English during classroom discussions, while another five of the respondents said that they tolerated the learners' code switching.

5. Discussion

5.1 The Presence of Code Switching in English Medium Classrooms

The majority (nine) ESL teachers said that code switching was prevalent in their classrooms and again the majority (nine) teachers said that they too code switched. However, six teachers indicated that terminologies did not exist in the mother tongue to facilitate code switching in English medium classrooms but three said they existed. Despite six teachers having said that there were no terminologies in the mother tongue to be used in the English medium classroom, the same nine teachers agreed that code switching was prevalent in their English medium classrooms and that they too code switched. Another interesting observation was that the use of mother tongue in English medium classrooms was not only used for classroom management, but for language analysis, presenting rules

that governed grammar, discussing cross-cultural issues, giving instructions or prompts, explaining errors, and checking for comprehension.

It is a fact that English has become both the language of empowerment and the language of education and socio-economic advancement; that is, a dominant symbolic resource in the linguistic market (Bourdieu, 1991). However, Domalewska (2015) argues that “the control over the classroom discourse leads to limited learning as there is no place for meaningful, spontaneous and natural interaction. Students can only acquire the language through involvement in interactions and relationships formed when they take in communication” (pp. 6-7).

In Namibia, English remains the language of the minority. Therefore, the dominant use of English in the corridors of power ramifies in complex ways classroom practices. This relates to the presence of code switching in ESL classrooms and learners’ participation, teachers’ use of code switching while teaching, the existence of terminologies in the mother tongue and learners’ participation when code switching was used. According to Domalewska (2015), “when Code Switching is used, it is based on the processes of assimilation, accommodation, developing meaningful cognitive sets (i.e., forming logical connection and organization in the material), and using advanced organizers (i.e., general concepts that help the learner to organize and understand new material). Meaningful learning allows the information to be retained for a longer period of time; the information may be retrieved faster; furthermore, the student’s cognitive structure is developed” (p. 7).

An argument that has been frequently cited by opponents of code switching is that local languages cannot be media of instruction because these languages lack sufficient terminologies and the vocabulary necessary for academic instruction. The matter was put to the teachers who participated in this study to gauge whether there were possibilities of an African language to be used as medium of instruction in Namibian schools. At the heart of this belief is the fact many African teachers subscribe to, namely the notion that African languages have not developed enough terminologies to be used in instruction. This is far from being true; it is a known fact that the English language that many African teachers have elevated to such giddy heights has extensively relied on borrowing to supplement its language deficiencies. For example, in 2010, when the Soccer World Cup was played in South Africa, the English dictionary added the term “Vuvuzela” to its vocabulary. The argument that needs to be advanced here is that if the English language is still enriching itself with new vocabulary borrowed from other languages, then what stops African languages from borrowing terminologies from other languages to enrich their own languages? The use of African languages as media of instruction has nothing to do with insufficient African terminologies and/or vocabulary. I argue here that it is the attitudes of policy makers, lack of political will, and ignorance among African educationists that hamper the use of African languages in schools as media of instruction, or even as an additional tool in the teachers linguistic toolbox.

5.2 English Language and Code Switching on Learners' Participation in the Classroom

The researchers also observed that code switching practices were not only inevitable but also necessary in the Zambezi Educational Region because English Language was being learned at the same time being used as a medium of instruction. ESL teachers regarded the impact of code switching on learners' classroom participation as both negative and positive. Among the negative effects mentioned were the poor English expression of learners, learners not knowing how to answer in English, and learners not being able to express themselves in English. Those teachers who saw the positive effects about code switching argued that learners had a better understanding of English grammar rules and better understanding of English vocabulary. Two Grade 10 ESL teachers were not sure whether English as the only medium of instruction enhanced classroom participation, citing the different achievement abilities of learners such as high, middle and low abilities and that participation was determined by learners' achievement abilities. One of the respondents felt that the school location had an influence on learners' class participation. For example, learners in urban schools learnt English at an early stage, which enhanced their participation in English only medium classrooms compared to learners in rural schools. The majority of the ESL teachers argued that the mother tongue aided learners to attach meaning to a newly acquired English vocabulary. This finding supports Rolin-Ianziti and Brownlie's (2002) views as they maintain that the use of the mother tongue is conducive to the correct understanding of the newly-input target language (English) for the learners. Furthermore, Simasiku, Kasanda and Smit (2015) argue that code switching creates an environment where learners are actively involved in their learning. In addition, Yevudey (2013) argues that code switching is useful for explaining and elaborating on concepts, increasing classroom participation, establishing good classroom relationships, ensuring the smooth running of the lesson, and making connections with the local culture of learners. Macaro (1997) indicates that most learners expect their teachers to speak their L1 sometimes to facilitate understanding. It seems from this study that there is a place for code switching in the Namibian English medium classroom as it serves a variety of functions. For example, it can be used as a tool to bridge communication and conceptual gaps among learners whose home language is not the medium of instruction. Teachers should be assured that code switching improves learners' performance both in content and language learning. Code switching should therefore be seen as a resource, which gives learners an opportunity to understand and comprehend their lessons, subsequently improving their performance in the examinations. It is also a tool to increase learner participation in the classroom, which in turn is a necessary prerequisite for academic achievement and cognitive development. . Of the twelve teachers who participated in this study, a substantial majority (8 out of 12) mentioned that Code Switching had positive effects on their learners' participation in their classrooms. In this respect, Code Switching can be viewed as necessary in the teaching and learning environment particularly in schools, which demand the use of English as the only language of teaching, and learning when learners are not yet proficient enough in the English language. In this case, Code Switching acts as a scaffold to support learners who are not proficient enough in the target language. The teachers' responses seem to further

support Duran (1994), who notes that Code Switching takes place when learners are not proficient in the target language and for “filling a linguistic/conceptual gap and other communicative purposes”. It is further argued by Setati, Adler, Reed and Bapoo (2002) that learners would be more effective in exploring their ideas if they were to use their mother tongue and that without the Code Switching alternative thinking would remain unexposed.

Alenezi (2010) adds that should the teachers realize that their learners are uncomfortable in using the second language, teachers need to code switch to build learners’ confidence and invite participation in the lesson. Learners’ Code Switching fulfils a number of functions, such as equivalence, floor-holding, reiteration and conflict control (Alenezi, 2010). Equivalence functions as a defensive mechanism that gives learners a chance to continue communication without any gaps resulting from second language incompetence. The second function is floor holding, which happens when learners cannot recall a word in the target language, thus, they use their mother tongue to continue to communicate. The next function is reiteration, which is used when a learner comprehends the content. And the last is conflict control, whose function is to avoid misunderstanding (Alenezi, 2010).

The views of the Grade 10 ESL teachers are in support of the views of Ellis (1994) who maintains that learners’ participation in the classroom or during lessons is one of the most vital classroom interactions. Therefore, it is of paramount importance that learners actively take part in their learning. The teacher can only guide learners if he/she knows their level of content understanding or their level of language proficiency when they talk in class. It was with this in mind that the researcher wanted to find out from the teachers about their learners’ participation in the classrooms where Code Switching was allowed. Teachers described learners’ participation in classrooms where Code Switching was allowed as follows: learners could express their views, learners actively took part in lessons, less English proficient learners had opportunities to take part in the lesson discussion; ease of content understanding; to show proficiency in their mother tongue and eager to know the meanings of anything troubling them in the content subjects. If the Grade 10 ESL teachers’ views above are anything to go by, one would assume that Code Switching, therefore, creates a conducive learning environment.

Despite all the positive effects that the eight teachers mentioned above, and what the benefits of code switching identified in the literature, what was instructive for the researcher was that a few of the sampled teachers (2) felt that learners needed to answer in English and that knowledge of English language would aid learners to do well and to communicate well in content subjects. These teachers further claimed that Code Switching demanded a new learning process, did not instil courage, created dependency and did not allow problem solving, thus hampering the learner-centred approach.

This line of thinking resonates with that advocated by Setati and Adler (2000) who argue that too much Code Switching, might not benefit the learners and that it is the duty of the teachers to make their learners to be fluent in English. Setati and Adler (Ibid) add that it should be kept in mind that using English as the medium of teaching and learning has a purpose, namely that of enhancing English proficiency of learners. All the unchallenged implications for the teaching practice behind the L1

avoidance movement can be seen through the five tenets emerging from a conference at Makerere University in Uganda in 1961, which according to Phillipson (1992), have come to be seen as a natural and common sense. These tenets are: (a) English is best taught mono-lingually; (b) the ideal teacher of English is a native speaker; (c) the earlier English is taught, the better the result; (d) the more English is taught, the better the result; (e) if other languages are used too much, standards of English will drop (p. 185). It can also be concluded that all the six tenets mentioned above are not based on research but normatively based. It is useful to note, however, that Setati and Adler (2000) concede that despite the foregoing argument, it is the duty of teachers to make sure that their learners understand the content and can communicate actively.

Of particular interest to the researcher 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 employed code switching in their classrooms. Similarly, in South Africa, the use of Code Switching in the rural areas is less compared to urban areas (Setati & Adler, 2000). The reluctance of rural teachers to code switch in English medium classrooms in the presence of an outsider could be attributed to insecurity and attitude, teachers feel that they might be seen to be incompetent or that their English proficiency is low, while urban teachers have transcended the issue of insecurity.

Educational researchers have found 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. It was also revealed by the teachers that when the mother tongue was used in the English medium classroom, it did not constrain learners’ understanding of the content; rather, it facilitated classroom participation. It was revealed in the study that Grade 10 ESL teachers were in agreement that code switching accelerated learners’ participation in English medium classrooms. The findings are similar to those found in Tanzania by Broke-Utne (2000) on the effects of using English and Kiswahili in an English medium classroom where code switching was seen to be an effective teaching and learning technique

6. Conclusion

Despite some ESL teachers claiming that there were no educational terminologies in the mother tongue for them to be used as medium of instruction, it was observed that code switching was prevalent in the Zambezi Education Region English medium classrooms. Code Switching levelled the ground for classroom participation among learners in English medium classrooms. After having looked at the arguments presented above, one can only say that code switching is inherent in classrooms that use a second language as medium of instruction.

In the Zambezi Region context, where English is a second language or a third language after Silozi and other Zambezi Region Languages, the use of Code Switching is seen as highly crucial among learners who are not proficient in English are still in the majority.

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