Code-Switching as Strategy for Effective Implementation of the Language Policy on Education in Nigeria

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Abstract

The Nigerian National Policy on Education approves the use of the English language as the medium for classroom instruction, beginning from the fourth year of the primary education up until the last level of the tertiary education in the country, Nigeria. Over the years, some scholars have faulted this policy for lacking effective implementation mechanism. According to them, often, the learners' and, sometimes, the teachers' proficiency level in English is low, compared to the content material being studied or taught. This, therefore, creates the need to examine other language media that may be more effective for education in Nigeria. The present paper examines the concept, theory and literature on code-switching, as useful classroom strategy and possible language medium that can be adopted for education in Nigeria. This study is an advocacy meant to sensitize the Nigerian policy makers, educationists, teachers, and researchers in the fields of language and education on the language resource of code-switching for formal education in Nigeria.
Keywords: education, language policy, code-switching, English language, multilingualism

Introduction

Education is the process of training people to fulfill their aim by exercising all their faculties to the fullest extent as members of a society (Aristotle). Similar to this definition of education is the one given by Adesemowo and Sotonade (2022) which states that education is "the total process of human learning by which knowledge is imparted, faculties are trained and different skills are developed". Education, which can happen within or outside the school system, is crucial for the wellbeing, development, and peaceful existence of a person in his/her society or environment. Teaching and learning, as well as language and

communication are key concepts in education. Language can be defined as the human vocal 'noise' or arbitrary graphic representation of the 'noise' in writing used systematically and conventionally by a speech community for the purpose of communication (Richard, 2010). Language is the vehicle through which a teacher transmits knowledge to the students. To this effect, the language of classroom instruction becomes pertinent. Salami (2008), on this, states that the language used in education is crucial, as the chosen language has the ability to either mar or enhance the quality of education.

At all times, the primary goal of a teacher is to influence positively the behaviour of the learner. Effective teaching can only be said to have taken place only when the learners reflect in their behaviours the knowledge, skills, values and beliefs acquired. Effective teaching enables the learners to become aware of their intellectual potentialities, and this further fosters intellectual development. Thus, the language selected as a medium of instruction should be such that promote effective teaching and learning. Kyeyume (2003) posits that the effectiveness of the teaching and learning process at all levels is dependent on whether or not effective communication has taken place between the teacher and the student. In the classroom, there exists a communication between the teacher and the students as the teacher delivers his/her lesson. The lesson can only be effectively delivered if the communication between the teacher and students is effective. For effective communication to take place, the teacher must use the language that the students understand and with which they can communicate. The importance of language in communication is expressed in this popular quotation by Confucius, the Chinese philosopher: "If language is not correct, then what is said is not what is meant. If what is said is not what is meant, then what ought to be done remains undone". This statement reveals the power of language and necessity of using the appropriate language for teaching and learning. In Nigeria, presently, there is a general outcry against the poor quality of graduates being produced by the Nigerian tertiary educational institutions. Regarding this, Dabalon, Oni, and Adekola (2001) contend that most of the Nigerian graduates are unemployable, because they lack the necessary professional and communication skills needed in many (business) organisations. The question is: why are the products of the Nigerian tertiary educational institutions, the highest level of training for the Nigerian youths, regarded as low quality and unemployable? Could it be related to the effectiveness or otherwise of the language used for teaching and learning in Nigeria?

Nigeria is a multilingual nation with over five hundred and twenty-one (521) ethnic groups and languages (Ogunmodimu, 2015). Bamgbose (1991) estimates the number of languages spoken in Nigeria from one hundred and fifty (150) to about four hundred (400). Bamgbose's estimate seems more plausible and conservative. Yet, the figures show the widely multilingual nature of Nigeria. English which is a foreign language in Nigeria was during the colonial era adopted as not just the national language but also the language of instruction in all schools in the country. The 1946 Constitution of the Nigerian Colonial Administration first made English language the official language of Nigeria and the language of the colonial administration (Adewunmi & Owoyemi, 2012). Since Nigeria gained political independence in 1960, the country has maintained the status of English as the official language of the country. The 1979 Constitution approves the use of English alongside any of the (major)

Nigerian languages, in the National and State Houses of Assembly. The same Constitution approves English as the principal medium of instruction in the Nigerian schools. As an official language in Nigeria, English is not only the principal medium of government administration, but also the principal medium of the media, legal courts, aviation, trade, and churches in the country. In relation to this, the Federal Government of Nigeria National Policy on Education (2004, 2014) states that: From the fourth year [of the primary school], English shall progressively be used as a medium of instruction and the language of immediate environment and French shall be taught as subjects" (p.16). The policy, however, states that the medium of instruction for the first three years (primary 1-3 classes) shall be the language of the environment. During this period, English shall be taught as a subject. The situation in most Nigerian schools, however, is that English is used as a medium of instruction even in the first three years of the primary schools, because most parents demand that their children learn the language early enough in their lives.

Presently, as the Nigerian National Policy on Education dictates, English remains the medium of instruction in Nigeria. This implies that all instructions, textbooks, and examinations on the different school subjects, except perhaps the language of the local community (taught as school subject), are conducted through the English language. Thus, English Language, as a school subject, becomes a compulsory subject which one needs to master, not only to understand the language, but also to use it to understand the other subjects one may be studying in school. For this reason, English Language is a compulsory subject taught at all the levels of the Nigerian primary and secondary schools, and at the foundation levels of the tertiary education (Anidi, 2021).

Some critics are of the opinion that the Nigerian National Policy on Education, as it concerns the language of instruction in the Nigeria schools, lacks effective implementation mechanism, due to factors which include non-availability of qualified teachers and lack of materials in the appropriate language (Ndukwe, 2015). English as a medium of instruction has been faulted by these scholars as not being very effective in the teaching and learning process. Learning certain subjects, such as mathematics and the sciences, using the English language may pose a problem for pupils whose home language is not English (Olusegun, 2011). On the other hand, as Olusegun argues, learning such scientific and mathematical subjects in the pupils' home language or supplementing English with the pupils' home language (codes-switching) can lead to a better understanding of the contents being taught. The aim of teaching is defeated if the medium of instruction itself poses a challenge to the learner.

English as a medium of instruction poses a challenge to teaching and learning when the teachers are incompetent in the use of the English language. Such teachers are limited in their ability to translate their ideas into a message that will bring about the desired response from the students. Sometimes, even when the teacher is competent enough in the use of English, using English alone in explaining complex contents or concepts to students, particularly those at lower levels, may be inadequate; hence, the necessity to code-switch. In this regard, Olusegun (2011) believes that code-switching can be adopted especially at lower levels of education for more effective teaching and learning. In a study conducted by Metila (2009),

teachers in an interview disclosed that they had no option than to code-switch in order for pupils to understand material content. Wei (2000) affirms this when he states that teachers use code-switching in order to transfer the necessary knowledge to the students for clarity. Metila also observes that the use of code-switching in a bilingual classroom fulfils a pedagogical function by making a challenging subject matter comprehensible to students. The emphasis here is on clarity. Therefore, employing code-switching while teaching will definitely foster effective teaching and learning in our schools.

Concept of Code

Code is often viewed from different perspectives. Anidi, Kadiru, and Otagburuagu (2015), citing Finch (2000), define code as a system of rules which allows us to transmit information in symbolic forms. The human language is an example of code. That means that the human language consists of words which symbolically represent ideas, events, and objects that enable humans to communicate. According to Stockwell (2002), code is a symbol of nationalism that is used by people to speak or communicate in a particular language or dialect or register or accent or style, on different occasions, for different purposes. On his part, Wardaugh (2006) defines a code as a system used for communication between two or more parties, and used on any occasion. From these definitions, one infers that a code is a language which communicators employ during communication to share ideas, information, values, knowledge, etc., with one another. Usually, people choose codes that are mutually intelligible to the parties involved in a communication process. People can as well decide to switch codes in the process of communication as long as the languages or codes used are mutually intelligible to the communicators.

Concept of Code-switching

Some general definitions of code-switching are discussed here. Romaine (1997) defines code-switching as the use of more than one language, variety or style by a speaker within an utterance or discourse or between interlocutors or situations. In the same vein, Nunan and Carter (2011) refer to code-switching as a phenomenon of switching from one language to another in the same discourse. Anidi et al. (2015), citing Finch, view code-switching as a situation where the speaker moves from one language to the other in the process of speech. The linguistic varieties involved in code-switching may be different languages or dialects or styles of the same language

Code-switching, in the opinion of Cook (2008), is "going from one language to the other in mid-speech when both speakers know the same two languages" (p. 174). Simension (2007) defines code-switching as borrowing one or more words from one's first language (L1). McKay (2002) views it as the change of language or a language variety by a speaker or writer. Such shifts in language or language variety can occur within a sentence or at a sentence boundary. McKay explains language variety as a language that has developed and evolved as a result of the spread of a language that meets and takes up features from another language. Typical examples are the Nigerian English or Indian English. McKay's description is remarkable because it includes switches between languages and language varieties. In the opinion of Finch (2000), many native English speakers will switch between speaking regional

dialect or non-standard English casually among friends, and Standard English for professional or business purposes.

From the definitions, we can deduce that code-switching is a language practice which occurs in a multilingual or bilingual setting. A multilingual setting is a setting where more than two languages co-exist. Multilingualism is a sociolinguistic phenomenon which arises from language contact brought about by factors such as political annexation, marital relation, economic transactions, cultural association, educational acquisition, and religious affiliations. In most counties where English is used as a second language, multilingualism, including code-switching, is usually an unavoidable reality. Nigeria is a typical example. Apart from the colonial English language inherited in the country, Nigerians, by virtue of other factors such as intercultural marriage, cultural interaction, travels, education, etc., are multilingual. In Nigeria, speakers most often switch and mix codes in English and any other Nigerian indigenous languages. The most commonly spoken Nigerian languages are Igbo, Hausa, Yoruba, and Pidgin. Incidents of code-switching and code-mixing usually occur irrespective of social class, ethnicity, setting and context.

Another concept similar to code-switching is code-mixing. While differentiating between code-switching and code-mixing, Stockwell (2002) states that code-switching as a universal language contact phenomenon reflects the grammars of both languages working simultaneously, while code-mixing does not reflect the grammars of both languages working simultaneously. In code-mixing, words are borrowed from one language and are adapted into another language. For example, a Nigerian bilingual who speaks English and Igbo can code-switch and code-mix. An example of code-switching from English to Igbo: "Ekene is a good boy. O na asopuru ndi toro ya". Here, the first sentence is in English and the second sentence is in Igbo. An example of code-mixing, using English and Igbo, and the same illustration: "Ekene is ezigbo nwa. O na asopuru ndi elders ya". Here, the speaker borrowed the Igbo phrase "ezigbo nwa" to complement the sentence which began in the English language, with its verb "is". Both the code-switched and code-mixed sentences mean the same thing: "Ekene is a good child. He respects his elders".

Myers-Scotton's Theory of Code-Switching
One of the most comprehensive theories of codeswitching is that proposed by Myers-Scotton (1983). She explains code-switching in terms of a theory of rights and obligations. She proposes a markedness model of code-switching which assumes that speakers in a multilingual context have a sense of which code is the one expected to be used in a particular situation; this is termed the unmarked code (McKay & Rubdy, 2009). However, speakers can also choose to use the marked code, that is, the language or language variety that is not expected in a particular social context. Using data from multilingual African contexts, Myers-Scotton demonstrates how bilingual speakers make code choices to signal a variety of social relationships. McKay and Rubdy contend that since, today, many individuals are using English in contact with other languages on a daily basis, their use of English is changing, and they are in the process of establishing their own standards of English grammar and pronunciation. In general, research on these emerging varieties of English indicates that the

codified and accepted standard of English that exists in these communities has few differences from other standard varieties of English. Hence, it is important for L2 teachers to recognize the integrity of the varieties of the language they teach, to realize that they are important sources of personal identity or signs of the current mobility of populations, and to avoid promoting negative attitudes toward such varieties. Unfortunately, as McKay and Rubdy observe, in many language learning and teaching contexts, the rich linguistic repertoire of bilinguals is not recognized, and policies are often implemented to prohibit the use of any code other than the target language.

The Usefulness of Code-Switching in a Multilingual Classroom
A number of writers have analysed the usefulness of code-switching in a multilingual classroom. This is because of the challenges encountered in using the English language alone as a medium of instruction, where the learners' and sometimes the teachers' proficiency level in English is low compared to the content material to be delivered. Kyeyume (2003) states that using English as a medium of instruction in a multilingual environment sometimes results in unsatisfactory educational performance. Some challenging topics or subject matters such as Mathematics and Science subject may not be effectively taught especially at the primary and secondary school levels without code-switching. This is because code-switching enables the teacher to move from the known to the unknown (2005). Code-switching, according to Metila (2009), enhances class participation by creating room for a relaxed atmosphere that further enables the student to learn and perform better. Arthur (2001) investigated the function of code-switching in primary schools in Botswana. He studied two Grade 6 classrooms. He found out that code-switching can be used to encourage learner's participation in class. Lee (2006) in his research contends that code-switching used by students in an informal context (outside the classroom) should be integrated inside the classroom interaction process because it offers the students the opportunity to contribute meaningfully in the discussion process; thus, bridging any social cum cultural gap. Similarly,

Setati, Adler, Reed, and Bapoo (2002) in a study on the use of code-switching in mathematics and science classes where the learners are multilinguals discovered that teachers who teach mathematics and science subjects encounter more difficulties in a multilingual context as a result of the double task of teaching these subjects in English while their learners are still learning English as a second language. According to them, code-switching is a useful linguistic practice in schools where English is being learned at the same time as it is being used as a medium of instruction. Setati et al (2002) further maintain that code-switching functions as a pedagogical strategy as it fosters learners' comprehension of concepts and ideas as well as aiding them in communicating what they have learnt. They therefore, conclude that employing code-switching in a multilingual classroom can enhance classroom communication. In the same vein, Setati and Adler (2000) studied code-switching in 10 rural and urban primary school and secondary schools in the northern and Gauteng provinces of South Africa. They found out that code-switching was used for academic purposes, including to explain and to clarify subject matters in mathematics and science where English was officially used as a medium of instruction.

Olusegun (2011) conducted a study on code-switching and its implications for teaching mathematics in primary school in Ile-Ife, Nigeria. He selected five schools in Ile-Ife, Nigeria, and employed ethnographic observation and structured interview to obtain data from five mathematics teachers and fifty pupils. The data he generated were analysed using Myers-Scotton's Matrix language framework model as well as descriptive and inferential statistics. His findings reveal among other things that the teachers used code-switching to enhance communication, teaching and learning of mathematics. Based on his findings, Olusegun concludes that the use of code-switching in a multilingual mathematics classroom does not impede learning but can be seen as a valuable strategy in classroom interaction which promotes effective teaching and learning.

Ferguson (2003) summarizes the functions of classroom code-switching into three broad categories, namely: (1) Code-switching for curriculum access: What code-switching does here is to assist learners in understanding subject matter; (2) Code-switching for classroom management discourse: In this context, code-switching can be used to motivate, discipline or exhort learners and to foster learners' participation in the classroom; and (3) Code-switching for interpersonal relations: In Ferguson's (2003) opinion, the classroom is not merely a place of learning; it is also a social and affective environment in its own right. Ferguson mentions that teachers who use only English are usually seen as not being close to the learners. This gap can create a learning difficulty because it lowers their confidence and hinders them from participating actively in the class. For this reason, teachers code-switch to establish rapport with the learners. Such code-switching, for Ferguson, also indicates that teachers acknowledge their dual identities as both members of the teaching profession and members of the local community. From the foregoing literature, we can see that supplementing English with the learner's first language (L1) can be an effective instructional technique especially for learners at a lower level of education. In such scenario, the teacher exploits the learners' L1 experience to clarify challenging concepts and content material. Learners learn easily and better when the teacher uses what they are familiar with to explain abstract ideas. Code-switching can be very helpful when teaching somewhat abstract concepts.

Arguments against Code-Switching
Cook (2002) after carrying out a study on the use of code-switching in a multilingual classroom argues that code-switching in a classroom may cause problems due to the fact that most modern classrooms are linguistically heterogeneous in nature. In other words, the students do not share the same native language. What this suggests is that application of code-switching in a classroom should be done where the students share the same native language otherwise those who do not understand the language code-switched with English would be hindered from benefiting from the use of code-switching as an instructional strategy. However, code-switching can still be applied in a multilingual classroom even when a few of the students do not understand the language code-switched with English. The onus lies on the teacher to use it wisely. For instance, the teachers should make sure that they explain a concept in English to the best of their ability before finally switching to the language of the majority of the learners in the classroom for more clarification. In Nigeria, virtually everyone, both the literates and the illiterates, understand and use Nigerian Pidgin

English. The teacher in the urban areas where the classrooms are most likely to be linguistically heterogeneous should supplement English with Nigerian Pidgin English to ensure he or she drives home his or her point especially when explaining concepts or ideas that the students find difficult to grasp using only English.

According to Palmer (2009), many multilingual speakers believe that code-switching is a sign of linguistic incompetence and many bilingual teachers strive to fight code-switching in the classroom. The numerous roles code-switching plays in the teaching and learning process, as revealed in literature, as seen here, illustrates that code-switching is not always a sign of linguistic incompetence, but can serve as a useful instructional strategy, if properly utilized.

Conclusion

Code-switching is a common feature of informal communication among multilinguals and second language speakers in any environment. In the formal education done in the classroom, many multilingual speakers believe that code-switching is a sign of linguistic incompetence and thus teachers in such environments fight code-switching in the classroom (Palmer, 2009). The discussion in this paper shows that in a multilingual classroom, code-switching is not always a sign of linguistic incompetence. It can be an engaging teaching technique, if properly utilized. Code-switching also allows teachers to clarify difficult content material, ideas, or concepts and foster learners' participation during classroom discourse. In addition, code-switching in the language classroom and elsewhere can be important sources of personal identity or signs of the current mobility of populations; hence, more positive attitudes to code-switching should be developed, even in the language classroom. In the opinion of Cook (2008), code-switching is more or less inevitable in the classroom when the teacher regardless of whether he or she is a native speaker, has knowledge of the students' L1. Then, the classroom often becomes a code-switching situation.

Recommendations

1. There should be an attitude change by teachers who regard code-switching as a sign of low proficiency in the use of English language. They should realize that code-switching can be beneficial when effectively utilized.
2. Code-switching as an instructional strategy should be incorporated into Nigeria's Language Policy on Education.
3. Government at all levels in Nigeria should through the ministry of education organize seminars and workshops for teachers especially those at the lower levels of education on how best to apply code-switching as an instructional strategy to enhance the teaching and learning process in Nigeria.
4. Teachers of the English language in Nigeria and other countries where English is used as a second language should be enlightened on the beneficial aspects of code-switching in the language classroom and as important sources of personal identity or signs of the current mobility of populations, to avoid promoting negative attitudes toward such practices.

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