Is Code switching complementary to English as medium of instruction in Namibian English Second Language classrooms?

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Abstract

In Namibia most teachers and learners are not conversant enough to teach and learn school subjects, including English, through the English medium. Poor learner performance in the year-end examinations in English has been attributed to the use of only English as medium of instruction. Despite such poor performance, English has remained the official medium of instruction in all subjects in Namibian schools. The objective of this study was to investigate whether code switching complemented the English Language in English medium classrooms. The mixed method design was used for this study, using both quantitative and qualitative methods. Questionnaire and an observation checklist were the two research instruments that were used to collect data. The sample comprised 12 English Second Language teachers at 12 schools in the Zambezi Educational Region, Namibia. The results showed that English Second Language teachers were of the view that the use of English as the only medium of instruction in the English Second Language classrooms, impacted negatively on the year-end results.

Keywords: code switching, language acquisition, literacy, biliteracy, English Second Language, teachers and learners.

Introduction

Roy-Campbell (1995) maintains that before most African countries obtained their political independence, the colonizers' languages usually served as the languages of power; however, there were cases where some of the local languages were appropriated by the colonialists to assist them in their crusade to 'civilize' Africans. A typical example of this was the use of local languages in the conversion of the colonized to Christianity. Roy-Campbell (1995) observes that converting Africans to Christianity was a key strategy in the subjugation of

Africans without overt physical coercion. Therefore, the use of native languages in this crusade was deemed important because it was assumed that it would be easier for Africans to identify themselves with the new religion as their languages were used as a media of learning and they could also communicate without the strategy of Code Switching (CS).

Language is at the heart of school learning, and if learners cannot use it properly for the purpose of learning, it becomes a barrier to both learning and thinking, rather than a channel for thinking. In addition, Phillipson (1992) argues that the continued use of an imposed language as the medium of instruction is linguistic imperialism, a form of cultural imperialism. He maintains that when learners are taught in a foreign language as a medium of instruction, it downgrades their own languages and cultures; it consequently implies that a language which is not used for education is inferior.

Therefore, if schools and schooling are to be meaningful to learners, learners should be taught in a language or languages which they can relate to. Policy makers and educators should be made aware that one's language is paramount in the learning and teaching process. Therefore, choosing a specific language as the only medium of instruction is something that must be given very serious consideration.

Namibia had been linguistically and politically isolated before its political independence. The then new Namibian government deemed it necessary to introduce English as the official medium of instruction since it is the language of wider communication and it was hoped that it would unite the Namibian people. According to Murray (2007), the then Prime Minister of Namibia, Hage Geingob defended the choice of the English in this way:

When SWAPO decided during its struggle for independence to make English the official Language of Namibia, and when the framers of the Constitution decided to choose English as the Official Language, it was not an ad hoc decision. It was a considered decision ….if there is no page no (p. 70).

Indeed, the linguistic and political isolation had to be redressed. However, during the redress process educational problems emerged. As Harlech-Jones (1998, p. 6) argues, "… the problem, by no means not only unique to Namibia, is the difficulty for teachers to develop lessons based on communication and interaction when they themselves lack fluency in English."

Jansen (1995) states that the introduction of English in Namibian schools as the sole medium of instruction from Grades 4 to 12 has been blamed for the poor performance of learners in examinations in all subjects. This seems to have

legitimised the outcry that the high failure rate of learners in school subjects in Namibia is due to the use of English as the sole medium of instruction after Grade 4. Nonetheless, no empirical research has been conducted.

The political agenda versus pedagogical concerns

Haacke (1996) argues that in most cases a country's official language policy can become an important political instrument for social engineering, be it to pacify minorities and avoid language conflict, to secure the predominant role of the language of the ruling elite, to neutralize or eliminate certain languages or to unite or divide people within a country. He contends that a language policy and its formulation are more of a political matter than a linguistic issue.

The South West Africa People's Organisation (SWAPO) government had an agenda for an independent Namibia; its election into power meant the implementation of that agenda. On this agenda was the language policy, which was articulated in SWAPO's election manifesto of 1989. To appease its electorate, SWAPO had to implement its election manifesto, including the implementation of a new language policy (Tötemeyer, 1978, cited in Donaldson, 2000). Previously the Afrikaans language used to be the lingua franca in most Namibian schools; however, after Independence it had to be replaced with English, no matter how imperfectly English was used by both teachers and learners. To consolidate SWAPO's political agenda formulated and concretised in exile, ten years later at the Etosha Conference in 1999, the then Minister of Education, Nahas Angula, reiterated that "the isolationist position has deprived the country of meaningful interaction with the outside world … the isolation has been further reinforced by communication problems and that Afrikaans, which was widely used for business and government, is not an international language" (Ministry of Basic Education, Sport and Culture [MBESC], 1999, p. 10). It was clear that for SWAPO, the linguistic and communication isolation of Namibia from the rest of the world topped its political agenda. Therefore, the introduction of English as the sole medium of instruction in schools over-shadowed any possible negative repercussions it would bring educationally, such as that learners and teachers code switched and code mixed in class.

In 1999, the English Language Teacher Development Project (ELTDP), in collaboration with the Ministry of Basic Education, Sport and Culture (ELTDP, 2000), conducted a national survey on the English Language proficiency of Namibian teachers across the different phases of education. The results of the study revealed that teachers' use of English for instruction, particularly when explaining concepts, was disappointing. It also revealed that, "… teachers in the other phases often use English beyond the textbook and this leads to a higher number of errors" (ELTDP, 2000, p. 31). ELTDP attributed these findings to the

fact that the lower primary school teachers were at liberty to switch to the mother tongue as medium through which they taught.

Table 1: **The distribution of percentages of the six (6) content subjects (2007-2010)**

Year	2007						2008						2009						2010						
Subject	A	LF	M	G	H	MB	A	LF	M	G	H	BM	A	LF	M	G	H	E	A	LF	M	G	H	E	Av
Schools																									
1	N/A	43.3	31.4	48.4	43.5	54.4	N/A	48.2	43.3	48.7	52.5	61.5	N/A	47.3	44.5	46.7	52.1	72.0	N/A	50.0	32.8	44.8	55.5	42.8	48.2
2	43.6	32	20.6	46.3	47.8	52.4	49	36.2	34.5	54.2	47.5	52.3	45	38.6	35.9	40.2	52.8	59.8	48.4	37.1	32.4	41.9	57.1	54.4	44.2
3	40	48.3	16.3	38.9	35.7	45.2	43.9	39.1	32.5	45.4	42	39.2	41.8	35	24.6	37.5	51.2	38.5	51	46	31.3	49.1	52.6	41.8	40.3
4	56.3	49.7	26.1	56.8	58.8	43.1	48.9	41.3	21.1	49	47.7	38.5	55.8	43.4	33.1	34.7	47.2	36.9	61	40.6	24.8	41.4	48.6	47.9	43.9
5	39.7	41.2	22.1	39.2	40.9	43.3	45.7	37.2	26.8	41.2	43.9	35.8	39.4	34.1	25.6	33.7	40.7	44.9	47.8	46.1	28.4	47.6	52.9	46.3	39.4
6	53.3	52.6	29.1	57.4	62.4	52.9	55.6	45.8	45.2	62.1	54	54.7	55.2	46.1	33.2	46.6	48.5	54.9	61.1	43.3	25.9	53	61.8	52.6	50.3
7	N/A	43.5	34.1	52.6	59.8	55.4	N/A	36.8	57.6	56	54.1	54.1	N/A	42.1	60	49	58.5	53.6	N/A	35.8	32	44.1	50	29.5	47.9
8	49.2	50.8	62.4	58	47.2	50.9	56.1	45.5	62	52.3	54.4	56.1	51.8	50	53.9	52.6	57.5	44.4	48.6	46.1	58.5	52.8	52.6	42.9	52.4
9	45.9	45.1	29.6	44	67.4	43	41.9	36	31.8	44	49.9	37.7	39.1	41.4	27.4	48.8	65.5	47.3	45	35.7	24.8	42.8	46.3	39.9	42.5
10	42.6	44.8	20.7	43.3	48.6	53.9	47.6	43.6	30.7	45.2	41	44.5	52.3	42.8	25.2	32.7	35.5	47.8	64.7	47.9	31.9	41.9	46.8	35.7	42.2
11	40.5	35.5	22.2	40.6	33.8	43.7	46	33.8	36.1	44	33.6	49.4	48	39.6	32.2	33.9	37.1	63.3	53.8	45.8	25.4	41.6	46.2	47.9	40.6
12	38.3	37.8	24.1	46.5	42.9	46.7	40.8	33.5	29	47.9	50.3	38.4	35.8	31.6	26.3	35.7	42.3	35.7	46.9	46	27.2	55	41.1	30.6	38.8
AVERAGE	45	44	28.2	47.7	49.1	49	48	39.8	38	49	48	47	46	41	35	41	49	50	53	43	31	46	51	43	44.2

Key for Subjects			Key for Schools		
A	Agricultural Science		1	Sampled School # 1	7 Sampled School # 7
LF	Life Science		2	Sampled School # 2	8 Sampled School # 8
M	Mathematics		3	Sampled School # 3	9 Sampled School # 9
G	Geography		4	Sampled School # 4	10 Sampled School # 10
H	History		5	Sampled School # 5	11 Sampled School # 11
BM	Business Management		6	Sampled School # 6	12 Sampled School # 12
E	Entrepreneuship repalced Business Mangement as from 2009				

Table 1 presents the distribution of the six content subjects per sampled school taught through the medium of English from 2007 to 2010. The averages at the sampled schools ranged from: Agricultural Science 44 – 52.8%, Life Science; 39.8 - 43.7%, Mathematics 28.2 – 37.6%, Geography 41.0 – 49.2%; History 47.6

– 51.0%; and Business Management/ Entrepreneurship 42.0 – 49.9%. These low averages in content subjects where English is medium of instructions could be signaling that the use of English is a problem to many learners.

Furthermore, Wolfaardt (2004) states that in national examinations, Namibian learners scored differently in their first languages and in the content subjects where they were taught through the medium of English (see Table 1). She cites the MBESC Report of 2002 in which Namibian teachers stated that the English language was a stumbling block for learners when answering questions in examinations. Similarly, the teachers wondered whether learners had really not mastered the work or whether they did not understand what the examination questions required of them (Wolfaardt, 2004).

Jansen (1995) maintains that since the introduction of English as a medium of instruction in Namibian schools, there has been an outcry and assertions that the high failure rate was due to the new medium of instruction. Wolfaardt (2004, p. 370) quotes the following comment from MBEC (2002) Circular: DNEA 14/ 2000: JSC *Examination 2002: Examiners' Reports*, which seems to reflect the views of Namibian teachers with regard to the History examinations,"… A large total of learners did, however, have problems with English which brought about that they could not express themselves properly and could not understand what was required of them".

A number of projects have been introduced to address this situation, such as 1999 the English Language Teacher Development Project (ELTDP), and the English Language Proficiency Programme (ELPP) and many other in-service programmes. A possible solution might be a change of attitude towards CS as an aid in English Second Language (ESL) classes. CS can be seen as bridging the communication barrier of the learners since the basis of learning and development is language and communication. It must be understood that teaching and learning experiences are built on the basis of language alternations, with the fundamental idea that the alternate use of languages reinforces awareness of the free, non-fixed relationship between objects and their labels and the necessary ability to separate words and concepts (Moore, 2002). Teaching and learning are based on language alternations; it is for this reason that CS is being advocated in classrooms that use a second language as medium of instruction. The issue of CS is at the heart of education reform and is being debated in most sectors of education the world over. The MEC (1992) states:

In these transitional conditions, while the stated language policy will not change, the use of language understood by the majority of learners in a class can be permitted temporarily. Indeed, even where resources are satisfactory,

experience in other countries has shown that the use of such local languages from time to time may help with the understanding of difficult concepts … (p. 10).

Even though the Namibian government has recognized the use of local languages in English medium classrooms to help learners to understand difficult concepts and terms, the idea of using local languages to bridge communication barriers has not taken root. Researchers such as Fantini (1987), Geneshi (1981) and Huerta (1980) focused on the role of CS in young bilingual Spanish children and found that CS should not be seen as a handicap, but rather as an opportunity for children's language development.

As a matter of fact, McClure and Wentz (1975) and Poplack (1981) focused their research on the social functions of CS. The social function of CS was found to be beneficial for negotiations between participants about the nature and the form of the interaction, which, in most cases, are explicitly revealed by conversation cues, social roles and norms, setting, topic of discussion and perceived status of the interactants.

For this reason, Huerta (1978) focused his research on the patterns of CS in the home among adults while Zentella (1997) focused on third Grade children at play. It was found that children code switched in both oral discourse and written form in order to communicate in an effective way and that parents' CS could be used as a stimulus for further development of children's home language in the home context. In other words, CS seems to have played an important function in the different circumstances mentioned.

In exploring CS in the classroom, Anguire (1988), Hudelson (1983) and Olmedo-Williams (1983) found it to be an effective teaching and communicative technique which can be used among bilingual learners. Their studies found that CS in the classroom was used for, amongst others,

- regulatory purposes (to control group behaviour);
- emphasis (to stress a message);
- attention attraction;
- lexicalization (lexical need, cultural association, or frequency of use in one language or the other);
- clarification;
- instructional (to teach second language vocabulary);
- sociolinguistic play (for humour, teasing, punning);
- Addressee specification (to accommodate the linguistic need or choice of the addressee or to exclude individuals from the interaction) and others.

Huerta-Macias and Quintero (1992) focused their study on the social context that combined school and families, and valued language switching as part of the whole language approach to the acquisition of literacy and biliteracy. Their study on CS analysed its effectiveness in teaching, learning and acquiring communication strategies in the classroom; the context included not only children and instructors but also parents. They found that language switching aided the acquisition of literacy and biliteracy.

Wolfaardt (2001) advocates bilingual language programmes as alternatives to the current language policy in Namibia which promotes the use of English as the only medium of instruction to second language speakers of English. Wolfaardt suggests that bilingual education in Namibian schools should be determined by social, historical, ideological and psychological factors that interact with one another. She further suggests that bilingual education could benefit learners and improve their academic achievement. To further consolidate the advance for bilingual education Moore (2002) says:

With two lexical forms in the bilingual repertoires, the learners can activate two images, corresponding to two types of knowledge. These images can be superimposed or not. Each of them adds new insights and focuses on a particular characteristic and contributes to building a more complete and nuanced vision. A dual repertoire helps the students elaborate knowledge from different levels of comprehension and information. They can relate new linguistic and conceptual materials to what they already know, and recognize its limitations when presented additional or differential meaning in a different language (p. 89).

According to Moore (2002), when a learner is exposed to bilingual instruction, he or she gains an insight into things from a dual perspective as this enriches his or her understanding of the world from a two-dimensional view. What he or she already knows from another language can now be translated into a new language which he or she is learning. Therefore, the introduction of CS in the classroom would accord learners the dual perspective, drawing from their mother tongue experiences to enrich their understanding of the new language. When CS is used in English medium classrooms, it helps learners relate to what they already know and fit together new ideas to old ones.

The major function of language in the classroom is its use for learning, for fitting together new ideas with old ones, which is done to bring about new understanding. Additionally, Bennett and Dunne (2002) maintain that these functions suggest active use of language by learners, as opposed to passive reception. They further indicate that learners' performance could be substantially improved if they were given regular opportunities in the classroom to use their

mother tongue over a range of purposes in a relaxed atmosphere (Bennett & Dunne, 2002).

According to Jones, (as cited by Wolfaardt, 2005) many Namibian learners fail to attain the minimum language proficiency in English before the introduction of linguistically and cognitively more demanding English medium subjects in Grade 4. It is likely that they acquire basic proficiency in English only when they enter the junior secondary phase of school, at which time they should really be functioning at an intermediate level, but they do not seem to do so; hence the need for teachers to code switch in the teaching of school subject in Namibia to enhance learners' grasp of the subject content.

As a result of language problems beginning in the primary school, learners continue to lag behind their required level of English language proficiency, and the majority never really reach the language proficiency in English which their age and school level demand (Jones as cited in Wolfaardt, 2005). Equally important, it is argued, that Namibian learners' cognitive academic language proficiency in their first language is also not highly developed, thus creating a problem in developing their cognitive academic language proficiency in the second language, English, which is the medium of instruction (MBESC, 2003).

To bridge this gap, CS could be a way of solving the problem of classroom communication. Harlech-Jones (1998) maintains that research has shown that strong and well-balanced bilingualism, if maintained properly, has very definite academic advantages for learners.

Methodology

All teachers in the Zambezi Educational Region that taught Grade 10 ESL classes formed the population of this study. Purposeful sampling was used to select 12 ESL teachers. Two research procedures were used to collect data. These were questionnaires and observations. The questionnaire questions focused on the perceptions of teachers on learners' participation and end-of-year results in classrooms where English is the only medium of instruction, while the observation checklist also assessed levels of participation in classrooms where teachers used English only. Content analysis was used to group responses from interviews and the observation checklist to determine the meaning of the participants' views and practices towards the use of English as medium of instruction.

Findings

English is a second or third language in the Zambezi Educational Region. Therefore, the aim of the study was to find out from the Grade 10 ESL teachers in the Zambezi Education Region whether the use of English as the only medium of instruction in their schools had an effect on the ESL teaching. In addition, the researchers also wanted to establish whether English as the sole medium of instruction influenced learners' participation in ESL classrooms. The teachers' responses are given in Table 2 and 3.

Results

Table 2: Teachers' responses to the effects of English on teaching and learning

Questions	Responses			Total
	Yes	No	No idea	
• Is English as the only medium of instruction a barrier to effective teaching/learning?	2	9	1	12
• Is the Namibian language policy on English as the only medium of instruction a barrier to teaching/learning?	2	10	0	12
• Does English as the only medium of instruction affect learners' participation in the classroom?	8	1	2	11

 Teachers gave mixed responses to the three questions in Table 2. Nine Grade 10 ESL teachers did not perceive English as the only medium of instruction as a barrier to effective teaching and learning, two regarded it as a barrier and one had no specific opinion regarding the matter. The responses in Table 2 demonstrated that nine ESL teachers did not see English as the only medium of instruction as a barrier to effective teaching and learning of the English Language.

The second question sought to find out whether the Namibian language policy on English as the only medium of instruction was a barrier to ESL teaching and learning. Ten also responded that they did not view the Namibian language policy on English as the only medium of instruction to be a barrier to teaching and learning, while two regarded it to be a barrier. Teachers are change agents in schools and classrooms; therefore, a clear mandate of what they ought to do is important in discharging their duties. Teachers often carry out instructions from higher authorities without questioning the appropriateness, validity and relevance

of such instructions. Shohamy (2006) notes that teachers' preference for the English language has nothing to do with appropriateness and relevance of using English as medium of instruction as stated in the language educational policy.

The third question aimed to ascertain whether Grade 10 ESL teachers thought that English as the only medium of instruction had a negative effect on learners' participation. Eight out of the 11 teachers agreed that English as the only medium of instruction negatively affected learners' participation in their classrooms. Respondents were asked to give the reasons for their answers.

Table 3: English medium of instruction as a barrier to learning

Respondents	Responses
A1	All other subjects are taught in English.
A2	Explaining only in English is a problem for some learners as they do not understand only when you switch to the mother tongue do they understand.
A3	Learners get to practice the language more, "practice makes perfect, they say".
A4	The introduction of preschool has changed the situation in some schools and yet those whose schools that delayed the introduction of pre-schools has suffered.
A5	The English medium of instruction at school must be compulsory because this prepares learners for the University, and not all other languages are used at the University.
A6	Learners will develop a culture of using the target language in their daily lives.
A7	Most learners in secondary school come from different languages, cultures, so teaching and learning in English will favour all learners at once.
A8	Learners lack vocabulary and it is good sometimes to code-switch so that they can get the meaning better and translate.
A10	Ministerial policies (government) are problematic. They encourage failure and dependency/laziness as well as irresponsibility, immorality and even un-accountability.
A11	No, because learners have been passing well despite the foreign language being used as the medium of instruction.
A12	Teachers have difficulties so they seem restricted/are very conservative in conversation with the regards to English.

Ten Grade 10 ESL teachers responded that they did not perceive English medium of instruction as a barrier to learning and gave varying reasons for their responses such as: All other subjects are taught in English; learners get to practice the language more; practice makes perfect, they say; the English

medium of instruction at school must be compulsory because this prepares learners for the University, and not all other languages are used at the University; learners will develop a culture of using the target language in their daily lives; most learners in secondary school come from different language backgrounds and cultures; therefore, teaching and learning in English will favour all learners. Some teachers responded in the negative as they felt that learners had been passing well despite the foreign language being used as the medium of instruction.

The majority (eight) ESL teachers were in agreement that English as the only medium of instruction did not hamper learners' participation in their classrooms. Based on the findings in Table 3, teachers appeared to have embraced English as the only medium of instruction in Namibian classrooms, even though it seemed to restrain their learners' active participation in classroom activities. From the observations in the ESL classrooms regarding low learner participation it was found that it was a common phenomenon that learners underperformed when the language of instruction/learning was not the learners' mother tongue. In addition, low learners participation might have impacted negatively on the learners' end-of-year results in Namibia (see Table 1). In view of this problem, teachers could devise teaching strategies that help learners master content while at the same time learn the English language. As architects of their classrooms, teachers should be accorded opportunities to implement teaching strategies that accommodate mastery of content. Seven of the teachers advocated for CS in English medium classrooms while two of the respondents seemed to blame the rigid Namibian language policy as a barrier to learning and teaching.

Discussion

The advocacy for CS by the majority of the ESL teachers in this study seems to legitimise the fact, as was observed in the classrooms, that teachers do not feel compelled to use English only when there is a need to code switch. However, to use the mother tongue in English medium classrooms requires such a mother tongue to be academically developed and understood by all learners. The use of the mother tongue in English medium classrooms, according to Collier (1989), requires that the mother tongue should be well-developed cognitively up to 12 years before it can be said to have been developed fully. Dutcher and Tucker (1994) argue that children need at least 12 years to learn their first language (L1); therefore, older children and adolescents are better learners of a second language (L2) than younger children. In this respect in the Namibian context, the mother tongue or L1 should ideally be used as a medium of instruction for at least the first five to seven years of education. Since formal education in Namibia starts at age seven, the mother tongue should therefore be used as a medium of instruction up to age 12 (for example, up to Grade 6 or 7 of primary school) before

changing over to English as a medium of instruction. The use of mother tongue as medium of instruction up to Grade 7 could help develop the learners' academic knowledge of their mother tongues to such an extent that teachers would be able to code switch when the need arises. However, this is not the case in Namibia since the mother tongue is used as a medium of instruction and learning up to Grade 3 only.

Conclusion

The introduction of English as medium of instruction and learning has weaknesses such as that it did not take into account that many Namibian teachers and learners were not proficient enough in English for it to be used as medium of instruction in schools. Though teachers had embraced English as the only medium of instruction in Namibian schools, many of them expressed the view that English only restrained their learners from participating in ESL classes. This low participation could have led to the poor examination results at the end of the year.

Implication for teaching ESL in Namibian schools

As long as English remains the only medium of instruction in Namibian classrooms, learners will fail to achieve the desired results. From the class observations, it was clear that teachers would teach through mother tongue as long as there was no one observing them; therefore, the use of the mother tongue as a tool in the English medium classrooms by both teachers and learners requires ministerial guidelines. A narrow-minded outlook that prevents teachers from assisting their learners in all possible ways, such as by employing CS to enhance comprehension should not be frowned upon, but rather be embraced and incorporated into the Namibian language policy.

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