
Code-Switching and Code-Mixing the Medium of Instruction in Lower Basic Education in Nigerian Schools

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Abstract

The English Language has come in contact with numerous languages the world over. It is significant in several ways in the communication process in different countries of the world where the language has become either a second/official language or a lingua franca. Consequently, language interlacing is inevitable in such situations. Code mixing and code switching is a feature of language interlacing. In Nigeria, the English language enjoys the status of a second language and its use is socio-linguistically determined. Consequently, the average Nigerian is bilingual/ multilingual in nature. The international status of the English language places some kind of high premium on the language that any country or individual for that matter, who wants to be part of the global citizenship and modern civilisation must have at least, a passable knowledge of the system of the English language. On the other hand, every indigenous Nigerian language is part of the identity and culture of the speech community using it. It is a fundamental and primary factor in conceptualization and meaning making process being the first language of majority of its users and therefore, plays a critical role in their lives in general and the communication process in particular. The synergy of the English language and the indigenous languages in diverse sociolinguistic contexts in Nigeria is given. This paper advocates such synergy in the form of code mixing and code switching English and indigenous languages in the classroom for lower basic education given the realities of the implications of the medium of instruction policy in Nigeria.

Keywords: Code, code-mixing and code-switching, medium of instruction, lower basic education

English is the official language in Nigeria. The language is used formally in education, business, religion, media and it is also used in many social activities that take place daily in Africa. Hardly would anyone disagree that English is the world's most important language as it has become the medium connecting people across the globe; a *lingua franca* of some sort for international communication. The English language is a British legacy on Nigeria. It is used mainly as a second language and the official language owing to its neutrality in a multi ethno-linguistic setting of Nigeria and the international status of the English language as the world's *lingua franca* of some sort. Nigerians communicate in English or in the indigenous languages depending on the sociolinguistic context. English is chiefly employed for formal occasions and medium of instruction while the indigenous languages are used for informal occasions. Consequently, the co-existence of the English Language with indigenous Nigerian languages has produced some socio-linguistic consequences such as interference, code-mixing and code-switching. This paper takes a critical view at the meaning of code as well as those of code mixing and code-switching. It also takes an overview of Nigeria's language policy in relation to the medium of instruction in Nigeria as well as delimit the concept of lower basic education in Nigeria. The theoretical framework for this paper would be subsequently explored. Finally, this paper proposes the applications and implications of code mixing and code switching English and Nigerian languages in lower basic education.

Code

Codes are vehicles of transmission of meaning. Human beings communicate using codes. Codes exhibit many properties that are rule governed and culturally defined. Codes can be verbal, non-verbal, paralanguage and discourse. Fundamentally, the meaning of a code is determined by socio-cultural and linguistic contexts. Language is one of the most important codes in transmitting meaning.

Code-Mixing and Code-Switching

Code-mixing and code-switching are consequences of bilingualism. It is the use of two codes in speech situations. Some scholars use the terms "code-mixing" and "code-switching" inter-changeably; others assume more specific definitions of code-mixing but these specific definitions of code-mixing may be different in different subfields of Linguistics, Education, Communications, etc.

Attempts by scholars at defining code-switching and code-mixing show that code-switching is "a common term for alternative use of two or more language

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varieties of a language or even speech styles" (Hymes, 1999). Bokamba (2003) defines both concepts thus:

Code-switching is the mixing of words, phrases, and sentences from two distinct grammatical (sub) systems across sentence boundaries within the same speech event. Code-mixing is the embedding of various linguistic spheres such as affixes (bound morphemes) phrases and clauses from a co-operative activity where the participants, in order to infer what is intended, must reconcile what they hear with what they understand.

Generally, code-switching plays the role in facilitating communication and understanding between speakers (Eastman, 1991). While Eastman (1991) believes it is futile to try and distinguish code-switching from code-mixing. Labov (1999) attempts to draw a distinction between code-switching and code-mixing thus: "if a person uses a word or phrase from another language, he has mixed not switched; but if one clause has the grammatical structure of one language and the next is constructed according to the grammar of another, a switch has occurred." Edogho (2003) would however, see code-mixing as a deviation from the norm or as he prefers to call it "evidence of internal mental confusion."

Code-switching can be intra-sentential or inter-sentential. Intra-word switching occurs within a word itself, for instance at morpheme boundary such as in *shopgasi* (English *shop* with the Igbo plural-ending, *gasi* (many) or intra-sentential occurring within the boundaries of a sentences or clause, e.g. as when an Igbo/English bilingual says *sha emeghikwa arrest a single person (ha emeghikwa means they did not)*. While inter-sentential switch occurs outside the sentence or clause level, that is, at clause boundaries, where each clause or sentence is in one language or the other, e.g. as when a Igbo/English bilingual says 'Sometimes I will start a sentence in English and end *yana Igbo* (and end in Igbo).

From the foregoing, it is obvious that both terms are used to refer to utterances that draw from elements of two or more grammatical systems. Code-switching/code-mixing can be either subtractive or additive. Subtractive in the sense that it can constitute a hindrance to the meaning making process; or additive in the sense that it can facilitate understanding.

Several factors have been attributed to why bilinguals code-mix and or code-switch. Crystal (1997) cites a speaker's language deficiency as one of the contributing factors for code-mixing. He notes that whereby a speaker fails to express himself adequately in one language, he switches to the other language to make up for language deficiency. To Edwards (2012), code-switching is instigated by a lot of psychological factors that include hesitation and sociological variables such as topic, audience and context. Below is an example of a single utterance exhibiting instances of both code-switching and code-mixing in English and Igbo.

1. Ada, gbanye RADIO ahu; (Ada switch on that radio)

2. Uche, bikomechie WINDOW ahu (Uche, please close that window).
3. Moto/ugboala m kuru ENGINE (my car engine knocked).
4. Biahu m na CLASSROOM (come and see me in the classroom)
5. Anyiebidola LECTURES (we have started lectures)

The lexical items in capitalized form lack Igbo expression because they are modern scientific and technological items which the Igbo culture inherited through contact with the western world. In the third example above, moto has an Igbo equivalent (ugboala) but speakers of Igbo, even the not so literate, simply use the English expression in most cases, the Igbo expressions are so long and cumbersome that speakers prefer the shorter and simpler English ones. Nigerian speech communities are prone to the linguists phenomena of code-switching and code mixing because of their multilingual nature Ahukama (1990), however notes that the Nigerian situation is unique in the sense that it is "unidirectional" unlike other situation where languages in contact are complementary, the Nigerian situation portrays the predominance in the exoglossic official languages (English) over the indigenous languages during code-switching or code mixing. In the case of the Igbo English bilinguals, the English language always interferes in Igbo based speech events in both formal and informal settings and rarely vice versa.

Lower Basic Education

Nigeria has witnessed some transitions in its educational system since after independence. First it was the 6-5-4 system of education which was seen as parochial, elitist, regurgitate and irresponsive to the needs and aspirations of the Nigerian society. Consequently, the then Federal Government therefore made efforts to find the type of education best suited to Nigeria's development, hence the identification of "6-3-3-4 system of education". The 6-3-3-4 system of education, which was introduced in 1982 to replace the 6-5-4 system, according to experts, was designed to inject functionality into the Nigerian school system, by producing graduates who would be able to make use of their hands, head and the heart (the 3Hs of education). The idea was to have six years of primary education, three years of junior secondary education, and another three years of either technical education for those who were more interested in learning a trade or three years of senior secondary school for those who were more academically inclined. The last four years of the 6-3-3-4 system is for tertiary education. The failure in the realization of the goals of the 6-3-3-4 system of education led to the introduction of the 9-3-4 system of Education [Universal Basic Education (UBE)] which took off in 2006. It has the first nine years of basic and compulsory education up to the JSS III level, three years in the senior secondary school, and four years in the tertiary institutions. The 9 years Basic Education Curriculum (Basic 1-9) has three components namely:

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- Lower Basic Education for primary 1-3 (age 6-8 years) Basic 1-3
- Middle Basic Education for primary 4-6 (age 9-11 years) Basic 4-6
- Upper Basic Education for junior secondary (JS) 1-3 (age 12-14 years) Basic 7-9

The lower basic education is critical in the educational career of students in Nigeria given its foundational nature for subsequent progress.

In spite of these transitions to ensure effective and functional education, the result leaves much to be desired. Statistics show that over the years, students perform abysmally poor in the English language. This in turn is translated in their performance in other subject areas given the all-important role of the English language in Nigeria's school system as the language of instruction and examination (Anyadiegwu, 2011).

Medium of Instruction

Medium of instruction simply means the language the teacher uses in teaching in the classroom. It is the means of conveying information to learners. It is the language of communication during the teaching learning process. As a matter of policy, such medium could be the official language of a country or the mother tongue of the learners. It could be argued that Nigeria has no language policy as there is no document designated as such. What could be termed Nigeria's language policy is deduced from the *Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria* (1999) and the *National policy on education* (2004). These documents have categorized the different stages at which the indigenous language and the English language would be used for instruction. The *National policy on education*, for instance states that, "for early childhood/pre-primary education, government shall ensure that the medium of instruction is the mother tongue or the language of the immediate community". At the primary school level, the same document provides that the medium of instruction shall be the language of the environment for the first three years during which English shall be taught as a subject. Subsequently, English shall progressively be used as the medium of instruction. There seems to be a lot of disparity between this policy and its implementation. It is either the medium of instruction is English even from the nursery through the lower primary to the upper primary or the mother tongue/language of the immediate environment is used all through. The choice of the medium of instruction is determined by such factors as social status, location of school and language proficiency of the teacher.

Theoretical Framework

This paper is hinged on two functional theories of language. Functional things are useful rather than decorative; relating to the way in which something works or

operates, or relating to how useful it is. Systemic-Functional Linguistics and Functional Notionalism are the two theoretical bases for this work.

Systemic-Functional Linguistics (SFL) is a theory of language centred on the notion of language function. While SFL accounts for the syntactic structure of language, it places the function of language as central (what language does, and how it does it), in preference to more structural approaches, which place the elements of language and their combinations as central. SFL starts at social context, and looks at how language acts upon, and is constrained by, this social context. It considers the applicability and the usefulness of language or code in diverse social context. SFL grew out of the work of JR Firth, but was mainly developed by Halliday (1961). He sees any act of communication as involving choices, and that language is functional because it evolves under the pressure of the particular functions of the language. Consequently, function shapes the structure and organization of language

The Functional-Notional Approach as developed by Finocchiaro and Brumfit (1983) presents an approach to language teaching that is sensitive to the individual needs of students. It is based on the idea that the ability to use real, appropriate language to communicate with others is the primary goal of most foreign language learning. Therefore, the design of a functional-notional curriculum contributes to, and emphasizes the goal of communication and interaction from the first day of study. It suggests general methodology and strategies that are most effective in helping learners use language appropriately in a variety of real-world situations.

These two theories become very relevant in the light of the functionality of code-mixing and code-switching at the lower basic education in Nigeria given the prevailing conditions and circumstances as it relates to language policy and medium of instruction.

Implications of the Medium of Instruction Policy in Nigeria

Research has proven that conceptualization and meaning making process is better in the first language or the mother tongue of the learner. Apparently, this informs the policy to use the mother tongue or the language of the immediate environment at the lower basic education. The irony of this case is the fact that texts meant for this category of learners are written in the English language. Obviously, there is some kind of synergy between the mother tongue and English in the teaching learning process. The language of the text is English while the language of the teacher is the mother tongue or the language of the immediate environment going by the policy. The implication of the fact is that, either texts for this category of learners are exclusively for the teacher's consumption, and learners would have nothing to do with such texts (this is practically impossible); or that texts are developed in all subjects in the mother tongue or the language of the immediate environment (which again is not yet possible in Nigeria). This disparity in the language of the texts and that of the teacher has

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resulted in the confusion inherent in the implementation of the policy at that level. It is either an outright rejection of the policy and a straight English as a medium of instruction (EMI) implementation, or a compromise evident in code-mixing and code-switching the medium of instruction to strike a balance.

Another glaring and worrisome implication of the policy is that if other things are equal, and the medium of instruction is strictly implemented to the later, there appears an abrupt and sudden transition from the mother tongue to the English language. One obvious thing that must be called to mind here as well is the fact that the content/concepts of the curriculum, language of the text and that of the teacher do not reflect the supposed elementary/ beginners' level at that point when English becomes the medium of instruction (middle basic). The contents and concepts in texts and even the teachers' language reflect the English language capacity for learners at that level; taking for granted the fact that these learners are just encountering English as a medium of instruction. Nothing provides for a gradual and smooth transition from the mother tongue medium of instruction to the English medium of instruction. Little wonder then, the poor performance of students in the English language and other subject areas; given the correlation of knowledge and performance in English and other subject areas. There seems to be a takeoff on an improper or no foundation for the learners. In adverse situations, the teacher carries on with the mother tongue medium of instruction injecting English words and clauses his language thereby code-mixing and code-switching.

Given that performance in some subjects like science might be affected by the use of a medium that is unfamiliar to the students because such subjects demand a higher degree of abstract thinking, language proficiency, and the mastery of scientific terminology. It is also a fact that technological concepts have become somewhat problematic in English medium of instruction class for second language learners as found in Nigeria that the only reasonable thing for the teacher when faced with such problem is to code-mix or code-switch the teaching process.

Conclusion/Recommendations

This paper has explicated the concepts of code-mixing and code-switching, medium of instruction and lower basic education. It has demonstrated that neither the mother tongue nor the English language is adequate as the only medium of instruction for lower basic education. This paper holds that: since the lower basic education is critical and fundamental in the academic career of students; since language is equally fundamental and critical in the teaching learning process; considering the fact of the importance and status of English as a global language; and since the mother tongue is proven to be very effective in conceptualisation and the meaning making process; there is the need to adopt a medium of instruction policy that would take care of the issues raised in this paper. Code-mixing and code-switching English and the mother tongue is

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the answer and is being seriously advocated in this paper. Nigerian government should therefore, stipulate policies to this effect and ensures its proper implementation.

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