The Prevalence of Code-Switching in Secondary Schools Where English is the Official Medium of Instruction: A Case Study of Buhera South District

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Abstract

This study explores the controversies surrounding the adoption of either an exoglossic or endoglossic language policy by Zimbabwean educational language planners. It is argued that the adoption of a foreign language as the medium of instruction was in incongruent with the search for quality education. The study discovered that although all classroom interactions should officially be mediated through English, in practice, there was widespread tendency to use Shona or a mixture of English and Shona, by most teachers and learners in all classes and subjects that constituted the schools’ curricula. While the majority of pupils expressed the view that they were not comfortable with the constant use of English as they were with Shona, teachers, on the other hand, argued that they deliberately code-switched at times to enhance pupils’ understanding and performances in the classroom and public examinations which they felt could be hindered if they stuck to English. This investigation, therefore, questions the wisdom of an arm-chair theorists’ wanton pronounced of educational policies that, in the eyes of classroom practitioners, impede pupil achievement. The study has, thus, concluded that teachers and learners’ unsanctioned departure from using the official language of the classroom is a form of tissue rejection of an exoglossic policy. It therefore recommends the need to rethink and revise the language policy of the country so that it embraces and reflects the teaching-learning reality on the ground.

Keywords: Code-switching, Exoglossic/Endoglossic language policy, Indigenous language, Medium of instruction.

Introduction

Multilingualism in Africa dates back to the partition of Africa when the European powers reshaped political and tribal boundaries. These powers also imposed their own languages on the countries they colonised. As a result, the choice of the language for education in most African countries has largely depended on the European languages and successful learning of these colonial languages has become the primary goal in the education systems, a situation that has deprived many of real education. These policies, however, have had a major impact on the
quality of education in the region (Magwa, 2006). Learning through the second language has disadvantaged learners since they face problems in attaining linguistic competence required for effective learning to take place and in mastering the content itself (Chaudron, 1988). The Zimbabwean Education Act of 1987 (as amended in 1990, 1996, and 2006) in Section 55, Part xl, headed “Languages to be taught in Schools” (Nziramasanga, 1999, p.64), attempted to rectify the language situation by elevating indigenous languages, Shona and Ndebele, so that they could be used as medium of instruction up to form one (Magwa, 2006). From form one upwards; English remained the sole medium of instruction.

However, language use in the Zimbabwean classrooms has been characterized by code-switching in order to accommodate the pupils’ lack of proficiency in the official language though the practice in turn impedes and compromises the quality of learning as well as pupil achievement in public examinations (Nyawaranda, 2000). One wonders then how pupils can effectively perform in such a dilemma since there is a greater correlation between reasoning and the language used in transmitting knowledge (Vygotsky, 1986). It is against this background that this paper, seeks to examine the prevalence of code-switching in the rural secondary schools where the official medium of instruction is not spoken by the child more often and establish the impact on Educational quality.

Methodology

The study adopted a qualitative research design in which a case study was used. Interviews and classroom observations were used as the research instruments. Teachers and pupils from a total of 13 secondary schools in Buhera South characterized the target population. They were useful because they are the key participants in the implementation of the language policy. 4 schools were then randomly selected to form the research sample. The sample represented the school types in the district. 12 teachers representing the different subjects in the schools’ curricula were purposefully sampled, three from each school. Twenty pupils were then randomly sampled, five from each school for group interviews. All sampled teachers and pupils spoke Shona as their first language. A total of 24 lessons were observed, two from each subject. All data was analysed at a descriptive level.

Findings

Below is a thematic presentation of this study’s findings:

Prevalence of Shona code-switching

The study discovered that there was no consistency between the language policy and the real practice on the ground. In practice, there was widespread tendency to use Shona or a mixture of English and Shona, by both teachers and learners in the school although all classroom interactions should officially be mediated through English. This was mainly meant to accommodate the rural learners who are barely competent in English. They were not comfortable with the constant or permanent use of English in the classroom.
Teachers admitted that they code-switched from English to Shona during teaching for a number of reasons. For instance, the following are some excerpts of what teachers said:

“‘Yes at times we are forced to switch to Shona but we don’t encourage code-switching in our Department...’” which implies that code-switching from English to Shona was prevalent even in the teaching of English as a subject. Another teacher said: “We code-switch from English to Shona because pamwe pacho sateacher unenge watoomerwawo nechirungu chacho.”[Yes we code-switch from English to Shona because at times even as teachers we fall short of the language.]

The above views point to the fact that the official medium (English), is ‘a language which neither the learner nor the teacher understands and uses well enough’ (Obanya, 1999, p.88). This justifies why 43% of the teachers indicated that they went up to college and university levels without mastery of the language even for communicative purposes. It was explained that, at the various colleges and universities they attended, again, they did not get any special training in the business of teaching the different subjects through English. Rather, emphasis in subjects such as History, Commerce, Science, Religious Studies, Geography and all Practicals, was on mastery of content. As a result this compromised their level of proficiency in English, hence code-switching to Shona in order improve communication. Information on the frequency of code-switching from English to Shona by teachers is tabulated below.

Table 1: Teachers’ use of Shona in subjects taught in English.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Respondents</th>
<th>Response</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Teachers</td>
<td>Very often</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Often</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Rarely</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Not at all</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

From the results above, it was noted that 100% of the teachers code-switched from English to Shona in the different subjects they taught. Thus, it was established that although code-switching from English to Shona is not encouraged in the system, it is very common among teachers of different subjects. In some cases, even when they are willing to teach through the foreign language, they are often unable to use English throughout their teaching (Allwright, 1984).

100% of the interviewed pupils maintained that all teachers had the tendency to code-switch from English to Shona during lessons though the degree differed from one teacher to the other. During some lessons, teachers were said to use English in the introduction only and the rest of the lesson would be in Shona mainly to enhance pupil understanding and participation.
On the other hand, pupils were said to code-switch more often than their teachers. One teacher said: “Pupils code-switch from English to Shona more often than the teachers but this has helped increase pupils’ participation during lessons”. Increase in participation by pupils when using both English and Shona interchangeably during lessons suggests that the use of English only restricts the interactive learning process necessary for meaningful learning (Mufanechiya and Mufanechiya 2010). Hence, the participants believed that the in cooperation of the mother tongue brought about genuine dialogue between the teacher and the pupils encouraging understanding and enhancing effective learning.

**Prevalence of Shona code-switching in different classes**

100% of the teachers and pupils believed that code-switching from English to Shona was prevalent in all classes, a clear indication of the violation of the language policy in search for effective teaching and learning. One interviewed Headmaster said:

> “Code-switching from English to Shona is practiced in all forms; we often hear teachers and pupils communicating in both English and Shona during lessons”.

What is interesting is that even at ‘A’ level where pupils are expected to express themselves competently in English, they code-switched from English to Shona quite often. Thus these results point to the inadequacies of a foreign language as the official medium of instruction. In some classes observed, the use of Shona during lessons was not controlled and as a result the official medium of instruction was dominated by the learners’ mother tongue to achieve better results. For instance, in one of the observed Upper 6 History classes, pupils contributed mainly through Shona. They had quite insufficient ability to discuss, question, or criticize facts and ideas through English (Allwright, 1984), a pointer to the weaknesses of the current language policy which gives priority to a foreign language over indigenous ones.

**Subjects in which Shona code-switching was prevalent**

The degree of code-switching from English to Shona in the secondary schools was also investigated in the different subjects that formed the schools’ curricular. Data gathered from teachers and pupils indicated that the practice was common in all the twelve subjects that formed the schools’ curricula mainly to minimize learning hardships especially in the so called ‘difficult subjects’. One Science teacher explained: “Shona inotaurwa muma subjects akawanda choizvo.”[Shona is used in many subjects.]. In support, one pupil simply said: “Shona inotaurwa muma subjects ese” [Shona is used in all subjects]. According to the participants, English as a sole medium of instruction, failed teachers to maintain the necessary rapport with pupils, hence, they resorted to Shona code-switching in order to enhance learners’ understanding. Such results imply that subjects such as Mathematics, Physics, Chemistry, Biology and Geography can be made easy to most learners if explained in a language they can understand better Mkandawire (2005).
Occasions during which Shona code-switching was prevalent

The researcher also investigated on the different occasions during which teachers and pupils code-switched from English to Shona during the teaching and learning process. Results indicated that in almost every occasion, teachers and pupils code-switched.

Teachers pointed out that they usually code-switched from English to Shona when explaining difficult concepts since pupils had difficulties in mastering concepts explained in English only. They believed that code-switching helped pupils understand concepts better. One teacher explained:

“We code-switch from English to Shona whenever pupils fail to master concepts expressed in English”

To enhance understanding, it was also observed that at times teachers explained concepts in English first and then repeats them in Shona. For example, in an observed form 4 Geography lesson, the teacher explained:

“We depend on what we get from the environment.”

Immediately, he repeated the expression in Shona saying,

“Tinorarama nezvatinowanawu kubva ku environment...”

After explaining in Shona, pupils could be seen nodding their heads, a sign of comprehension. This suggests that using English only as the medium of instruction hinders pupils’ understanding especially in these rural areas. This was also highlighted by one Mathematics teacher saying:

“Kana ukasatoshandisa Chishona hazvifambi. Kunyanya vana vedu vemuno Muruzevha ava Chirungu chacho havatochinzwii.”[If you do not use Shona, it won’t work out for you especially with our rural pupils who do not understand English.]

This contribution suggests that pupils enjoy learning when they learn through a language they understand. They also develop positive attitude towards school work. This points to the necessity of indigenous languages as media of instruction in education.

Code-switching was also prevalent when teachers and pupils posed questions. Pupils had difficulties in interpreting questions posed in the foreign language. For example in one of the ZJC History lessons, the teacher asked:

“What steps were taken by Cecil John Rhodes to occupy Zimbabwe by 1890?”

When pupils failed to respond, the teacher repeated the question in Shona saying:
“Ndeapi matanho akatorwa naRhodes kuti akwanise kupinda muZimbabwe?

Introducing some bit of Shona therefore, enabled even the slow learners to interpret questions, respond to them and ask for further explanations. Thus the in cooperation of Shona enhanced mutual understanding between the teacher and the pupils ensuring effective communication between the two sides.

Pupils’ efforts were also commented in the vernacular. An example can be drawn from an observed Form 1 Commerce lesson. The teacher said:

“Agona ngatimuombererei maoko, ndizvozvo”

[Good, let’s clap hands for him, that’s it]

Teachers believed that learners are better motivated if they are commented in their own language, a language which is close to their hearts and minds (Mkandawire, 2005). However it was noticed during research that in some cases, teachers carelessly code-switched because they were used to communicating in Shona most of the times, during meetings, workshops, sporting activities, spare times and at home.

78% of the teachers showed that pupils code-switched from English to Shona more often when working in groups, when asking questions and responding to questions posed by teachers and colleagues. One teacher said:

“Pupils can express themselves better in Shona. Most of them are not good at English…”

Data collected from pupils indicated that the incorporation of Shona helped them build self-confidence in order to communicate easily, understand each other better and express themselves fully. However, although code-switching helped pupils understand concepts better and freely express themselves, the practice has also to a certain extent impacted negatively on pupils’ performance, both in the classroom and in the public examinations.

It was highlighted by some teachers that pupils produced poor quality essays in the different subjects that were taught and examined through English. Code-switching could not help them when it comes to written work because pupils were forced to use English only. Because of code-switching during oral work most pupils could hardly communicate through the foreign language in good English. One English teacher said: “some of the compositions we mark are written in ‘Shonglish’. These pupils think in Shona first and then translate into English…” This also affected their performance in the public examinations where they failed to understand and interprete the questions asked in English. This compromised the quality of their passes.
Conclusion and Recommendations

Results from the study showed that in Education, one domain which was a preserve of English, indigenous languages are being used in search for effective teaching and learning. This is a true reflection of the extensive poor proficiency in English amongst teachers and pupils especially in the rural areas, a problem which requires immediate attention in the Zimbabwean Education policies. The study also indicated that code-switching is unavoidable as long as a foreign language is the only language of the classroom but cannot solve all the challenges faced by both teachers and pupils during classroom interactions. Teaching and learning completely depend on language and so to provide quality education to pupils; we need the right medium of instruction which is understood by both teachers and pupils. It is in the light of this study that the researcher is recommending:

- the consideration of indigenous languages (not Shona only) as medium of instruction in education so as to include the majority of Zimbabwean pupils.
- the government should articulate a programme of job creation and employment on the basis of proficiencies in any one language (indigenous or foreign).
- the government should give financial help to organizations that are carrying out researches on indigenous languages such as the African Languages Research Institute which has done a great job of coming up with dictionaries in Shona.
- the government should come up with a clear language policy.

References


