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Code-switching and its Literacy Effects on the Acquisition of English Language by Yoruba / English Language Bilinguals

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Abstract

This study identified the reasons why people codes-switch, studied the influence parents, teachers and peers had on the code choice of students and recommendations were given to solving the problems of codes-switching. Questionnaires were administered on two hundred (200) students, fifty from each school who are predominantly speakers of Yoruba language and they were randomly drawn from SSS1 to SSS3 of the following schools: Saint Magarets School, Ilesa, Ilesa Grammar School, Ilesa, African Church Grammar School, Ilesa, and Saint Lawrences Grammar School, Ilesa. The result on the test of educational background revealed that students with sub-standard educational background use code-switching more than those with standard educational background. Another fact revealed was that nearly all the teachers that were involved in the research do code-switch. And lastly it revealed that the language individuals speak at home has tremendous influence on them. The study concluded that students should be warned about the danger inherent in switching if made to become a habit and that students should be discouraged in the use of switching in informal settings so as to facilitate the free flow of communication between or among the speakers.

Keywords: Code-switching, Literacy-Effects, Language Acquisition, Bilinguals Global Communication

1.1 Introduction

English Language is a West Germanic language that arose in England and South Eastern Scotland in the time of the Anglo Saxon. Following the economic, military, scientific, cultural and colonial influence of Britain and United Kingdom from the 18th century United States since the 20th century, it has been widely dispersed around the world becoming the leading language of international discourse and has acquired use as lingua franca in many regions including Nigeria. The Briton administered the country in English, established schools and required that all students be taught in English.

Literacy is largely dependent upon teaching. While some local indigenous scripts are taught relatively informally by parents or someone who knows the script well, widespread or universal literacy is dependent upon schooling. Indeed, in many societies schooling and literacy have been almost synonymous. Schools in such diverse places as Sumer and China developed concurrently with the development of a full writing system and were concerned primarily with teaching first adults and later children to read and write. And it is inconceivable that modern technological societies could survive without schools to develop high levels of literacy.

Code-switching is the mixing of more than one language in a discourse and it is an evidence of language contact. In Nigeria situation, the contact is often between one local language and English regardless of one's tribe or background. Many people see code-mixing as a sign of linguistic decay, the unsystematic result of not knowing at least one of the involved language very well. (Appel and Muysken, 1988).

The use of more than one language alternatively in a discourse situation can further be explained if a distinction is made between code-switching and borrowing. Borrowing is an importation of certain

linguistic items from one language to another. This phenomenon is as a result of language contact which happens mostly in bilingual communities.

2.1 The nature of Human Language.

Language is characterized by a set of vocal sounds by which human beings communicate their experiences. It can be described in terms of units of sound (phonemes, words, morphemes, phrases, sentences and paragraphs or discourse which can be decoded. 'It has its own structure, its own system of organizing its component units into meaningful patterns' (Akindele and Adebite, 1992). Individual or community i.e. as the existence of two languages by an individual or a speech community (Lambert, 1977). It is a common phenomenon rather than an exception in most countries of the world today. In Nigeria, for instance, it is highly expected of an average citizen to be able to speak English. They also note that there are rules governing organization of sentences such as tense and concord. They further postulates that human language is conventional and culturally transmitted.

3.1 Literacy

It is common to think of literacy as the simple ability to read and write. Such thinking is in part a consequence of the naïve assumption that alphabetic literacy is a matter simply of decoding graphs into sounds and vice versa. In fact, literacy involves competence in reading, writing and interpreting texts of various sorts. It involves both skill in decoding and higher levels of comprehension and interpretation. These higher levels depended upon knowledge both of specialized uses of language and of specialized bodies of knowledge. The intimate relations between language, literacy and specialized bodies of knowledge have contributed to the identification of literacy with schooling.

Partly because of the close tie between schooling and literacy, literacy levels are often defined exclusively in terms of number of years that a person has attended school. Educational institutions usually differentiate a basic or functional level of literacy, roughly equivalent to 10-12 years of schooling. The number of years spent in school does not hinder code-switching especially with those people having English Language as their second language. The knowledge of the first and second language brings about code-switching, which means there is a level of literacy in the speaker concerning the two languages.

4.1 The Notion of Bilingualism.

The term Bilingualism can be defined as the use of two languages by an individual alongside his/her indigenous language. Apart from the fact that English is our official language, it has also become the language of global communication as it is constantly used in the field of science, technology, medicine, law, journalism, world politics e.t.c. In order for someone to be abreast of the happenings both at home and in the outside world, one should be able to communicate in English. It is no longer seen as a language of colonialism as some of its words have gone through the process of domestication. By this, it can be said that English has come to stay. Even five decades after independence, English Language is still waxing stronger and stronger.

5.1 Code-Switching.

As earlier reiterated scores of Nigerians are bilinguals. The resultant outcome of this bilingualism is code-switching. This is described as a means of communication which involves a speaker alternating between one language and the other in discourse situation. In this way two or more languages are spoken together alternately at a point in time during conversation. Di Pietro (1977) defined code-switching as 'the use of more than one language by discussants in the execution of speech act'. This definition given by Pietro was corroborated by Appel and Muysken, (1988) that code-switching is more than one language in a discourse situation. Lambert (1977) says code-switching is the use of two languages side by side in a conversation. Gumperz (1971) also defined code-switching as the alternation between two systems (codes) during conversation. Akindele & Adebite (1992) defined code-switching as "a means of communication which involves a speaker alternating between the language and the other in communication events,...

someone who code switches uses two languages or dialects interchangeably in a single communication". This switching, they said, can be inter-lingua or intralingua. According to them, code-switching can be discussed from two different perspectives, the functional and formal perspectives. The functional types are the conversational, situational and metaphorical.

In conversational code-switching, the same speech act is involved ... the bilingual is involved in the discussion of a particular topic. Such an individual may also be involved in a casual talk in an attempt to carry out the communication; he employs items from two different languages and ties them together by syntactic and semantic relations.

In situational code-switching, two different languages are assigned to two or more different situations. The setting, activities and participants in such situations remain the same. An individual may have knowledge of all the languages associated with different situations. However, conversational etiquette requires the use of only one language at a time.

Metaphorical code-switching involves the use of two different languages which serves as a metaphor representing different situations. This may be due to a change of subject matter or new set of role relations set up. The situational factors such as setting activities and participants also remain the same. Each of the two languages in alternation could be assigned to identifiable stages or episodes of the same speech event.

The formal code-switching on the other hand refers to the linguistic realization of code-switching from one language to the other. There are three sub-types under this category. Code-switching is the first sub-type and it refers to a complete change from one language to another language. There is inter-sentential code change which realizes a switch that takes place across sentences with a blend of the two codes of communication that are involved in the communicative process. E.g. "Jowo fimi sile. I've told you am not interested. O tun lo fejo mi sun ore e". The second sub-type is intra-sentential code change or switching. This is a switch that takes place within a sentence at major constituent boundaries such as noun phrases, verb phrases and clauses. E.g. "The Dean said – a gbodo submit – before the end of the week". Code-mixing is the third sub-type and it refers to a situation whereby two languages are used in a single sentence within major and minor constituent boundaries. The mixing of items occurs almost at the word level e.g. "Kilo n happen si e".

6.1 Functions of code-switching

Pieter Muysken and Edward Arnold (1988), see switching not as an isolated phenomenon, but a central part of bilingual discourse. To them, switching performs about five functions and they also give reasons why people code-switch.

6.1.1 Referential function

Here, there are certain subjects that are more approximately discussed in one language and the introduction of such subject can lead to a switch. Also, a specific word from the language involved may be semantically more appropriate for a given new concept. They noted that this function is the one that bilingual speakers are most conscious of. When asked by the switch, they say it is because they do not know the word for it in the other language and the word is readily recalled in the switched language.

6.1.2 Directive Function

This involves a level of confidentiality and this is done by exempting some people out of the scene of conversation. It involves the hearer directly.

6.1.3 Expressive function

The speakers emphasize a mixed identity through the use of two languages in the same discourse.

6.1.4 Phatic function

This type of switching indicates the tone of the conversation.

6.1.5 Metalinguistic function

This comes into play when it is used to comment directly or indirectly on the languages involved. One example noted by them is "when speakers switch between different codes to impress the other parts with a show of linguistic skill. Many of this can be found in the public domain e.g. performers, directors, market sales people e.t.c.

Akindele & Adegbite, (1992) defined code-switching as a situation whereby participants are often conscious of which language they are using at a point in time in their discussion... The co participants are not conscious of who switches from one language to the other and the particular languages being used at a particular time. They also observed that speakers are mainly concerned with the content of the conversation and the mode of the conversation is also very difficult to recall in its entirety. As said earlier that people code-switch not because they do not understand the languages involved but it is patterned much the same way as if it were following the grammatical rule for a single language. "A bilingual who does not understand the structure of the language in a code-switching event may find it difficult to switch accurately" (Akindele & Adegbite , 1992). To substantiate this view, they assert that "an understanding of the structure of the language involved is a necessary pre-requisite for an individual to be able to code-switch efficiently

From the several views expressed; one can say that code-switching is not often done out of laziness and one does not code-switch due to lack of understanding of the languages involved but it is always done unconsciously by the participants except in some rare situations e.g. when discussing a subject like chemistry, physics etc. when there would be a deliberate need by the speaker to code-switch.

Lastly, it should be mentioned that in any code-switching event, topic, speaker's setting are the constant variables and that most of this code-switching takes place informally. However, the formal code-switching is always to teach some 'things' which are better expressed in one language rather than the other. For example, a teacher could switch to Yoruba in an English class so as to teach students some expressions, concepts, words etc. which are strange to them.

7.1. Analysis

Tables are presented to show and explain the responses of the respondents to the three main questions.

Table 1 represents the reactions of the respondents to the first test.

Table 2 represents the responses of the respondents to the second test.

Table 3 represents the reactions of the respondents to the third test.

The questionnaires were administered on students who are predominantly speakers of the Yoruba language and they were drawn randomly from SSS 1 to SSS 3. Table 1 shows the reactions of the respondents to the first test which is on their educational background and reveal that 56 have standard educational background while 144 have less standard educational background. It is further represented in figure 1. Table 2 shows the reactions of the respondents to second test, which is on the rate at which teachers code-switch. This table shows that 171 of the 200 teachers used the mixture of English and Yoruba in the classroom teaching more often while the remaining 29 do not make use of switched language. This is also represented in Figure 2. Table 3 shows the test on the rate at which the respondents code-switch when communicating with their parents at home. It reveals that 44 respondents speak English solely with their parents at home, 47 said they communicate strictly in Yoruba with their own parents at home as compared to their use of English while 109 said they use a mixture of both English and Yoruba at Home more than the use of only Yoruba or English. This is further represented in figure 3.

8.1 Discussion of Findings

The result of the test of the educational background shows that students with sub-standard educational background use code-switching more than those with standard educational background. Standard educational background in this regard means the attendance of private primary schools while the students who attended public primary schools are those considered as having sub-standard education. The reason for grouping them thus is because emphasis is given to the use of English in the private primary schools as opposed to the use of Yoruba as a medium of instruction in the public primary schools. As

evident in this research, a large percentage of respondents switch from Yoruba solely to English. This is done in their attempt to acquire more English words.

Another reason is that they have got themselves familiarized with the mixture. This might not be unconnected with the reason that their teachers do use Yoruba to explain some new concepts of English to them. Coupled with this is the frequent use of the mixture of English and Yoruba between the parents and the students at home, thus, they now find it easy to code-switch instead of sticking to the use of either Yoruba or English. 56 of the respondents with standard educational background are the students who have been more exposed to the use of English as compared to the other codes. They use it at times to make the lesson interesting and it is also use to crack jokes in the classroom.

As shown in Table 2, 29 out of the 200 respondents said that their teachers do not code-switch as such. Another fact that is evident here is that during the conduct of the research, it was observed that nearly all the teachers that are involved in the research do code-switch. The reason for this might be either one or more of the reasons stated by the respondents above. Obviously, it is no gainsaying the fact that the home of individuals has a tremendous influence on them. This is equally true of the language phenomenon. The research was even done to find out some likely impact the language one uses at home could have on one's choice of language. Another reason why the point of interest is the choice of the language at home is due to the fact that out of the 24 hours that makes a day, only eight hours is spent in school while the rest sixteen hours is spent at home.

To now determine the language a person uses more than the other, the language spoken at home should be given some consideration. In this regard, some questions were asked in which the respondents are required to state, the code that is frequently used when conversing with their parents at home. Records available from the research as shown in Table 3 indicates that 109 of the respondents use code-switching more than Yoruba solely or English, 44 speaks English with their parent while 18 said they use only Yoruba in communicating with their parents. It is evident here that code-switching has almost become a language in itself, because the respondents use it more than Yoruba or English.

9.1 Reasons given by Code -Switchers

The reason(s) given by respondents that use code-switching commonly is also tested. They were asked to state their reason(s) for code-switching and equally the possible effect(s) the switching can have on their acquisition of the English Language. A number of reasons were given for their code-switching and these can be summed up in the following four ways:

- (i) That the switching enables them to discuss freely with their friends and parents at home.
- (ii) That it helps them to understand new English concepts better if explained in Yoruba. By this, it is meant that there are some certain subjects that are more appropriately discussed in a switching language.
- (iii) That it is because they do not know the word for it in the other language and that the word is readily recalled in the switched language; and
- (iv) That it serves as a status symbol. Switching here serves as a directive function, according to Muysken and Arnold, (1988), in that it involves the hearer directly.

10.1 Conclusions and Recommendations

In conclusion, it can be said that code-switching in itself is not bad because if the situations during which it can be used is mastered, speakers will know when to code-switch and when not to code-switch.

Because of the new status or position which switching is beginning to gain ground among the students and the teachers alike and its usage in the classroom discussion; some observations and recommendations have to be made, and these observations and recommendations are arrived at from the information supplied in the questionnaires:-

- (i) The students should be encouraged to speak English very often so as to increase their level of proficiency in it. This becomes pertinent because as we all know, it is equally the widely used language across the globe. So, its relevance cannot be underscored.
- (ii) Students should be warned about the danger inherent in switching if made to become a habit. This is because they may not find it easy to master the rules of either Yoruba or English.
- (iii) Code-switching should not be considered as a language on its own formal settings or discussions. Hence, its use in the classroom discussions should be discouraged except that it can be used on rare occasions to explain new concepts if the students get confused.
- (iv) The students should not be discouraged in the use of switching in informal settings so as to facilitate the free flow of communication between or among the speakers.

If these observations/recommendations are taken into consideration, people will not misconstrue what code-switching really is and the purpose(s) it could serve in a given speech community.

The effects, the respondents indicated in the questionnaires shows that they all agreed that code-switching has a substantial influence on their literacy level and acquisition of the English Language which they all strive to acquire. The effects stated were mostly positive. For example:-

- (i) It helps in the better understanding of the two languages in question.
- (ii) It helps in the translation of English to Yoruba and vice- versa and that it is also helpful in cracking jokes in some occasions.

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Table 1 Educational Background

Group	Class No	Educational Background	
		Standard	Less Standard
1	SSS-50	30	20
2	SSS-50	10	40
3	SSS-50	09	41
4	SSS-50	07	43
Total	200	56	144

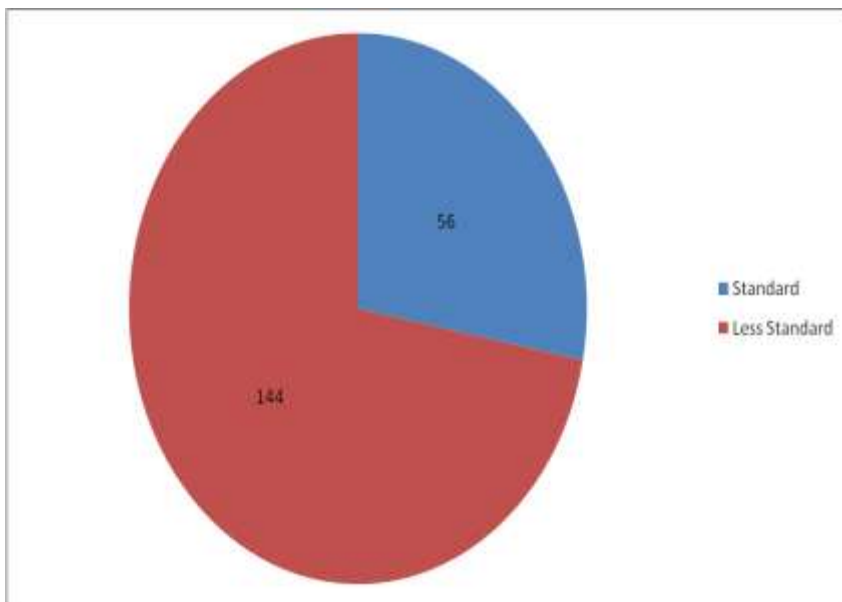


Figure 1 Educational Background of Code-switchers

Table 2 Teachers rate of Switching

Group	Class No	Teachers rate of switching	
		High	Low
1	SSS-50	50	None
2	SSS-50	40	10
3	SSS-50	43	07
4	SSS-50	38	12
Total	200	171	29

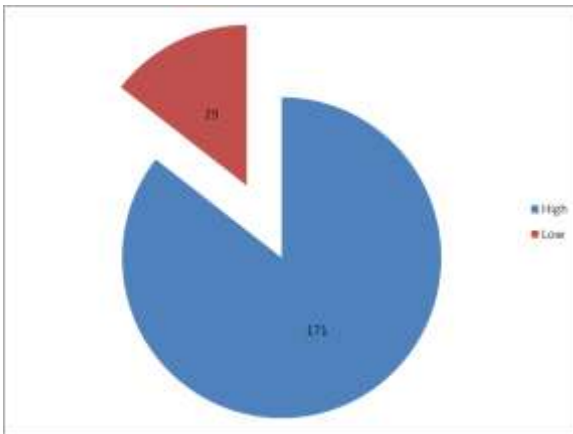


Figure 2 Teachers rate of Switching

Table 3 Rate of code-switching with Parents at home

Group	Class No	Communication with parents at Home		
		English	Yoruba	
Mixture				
1	SSS -50	19	06	25
2	SSS -50	02	18	30
3	SSS -50	13	08	29
4	SSS -50	10	15	25
Total	200	44	47	109

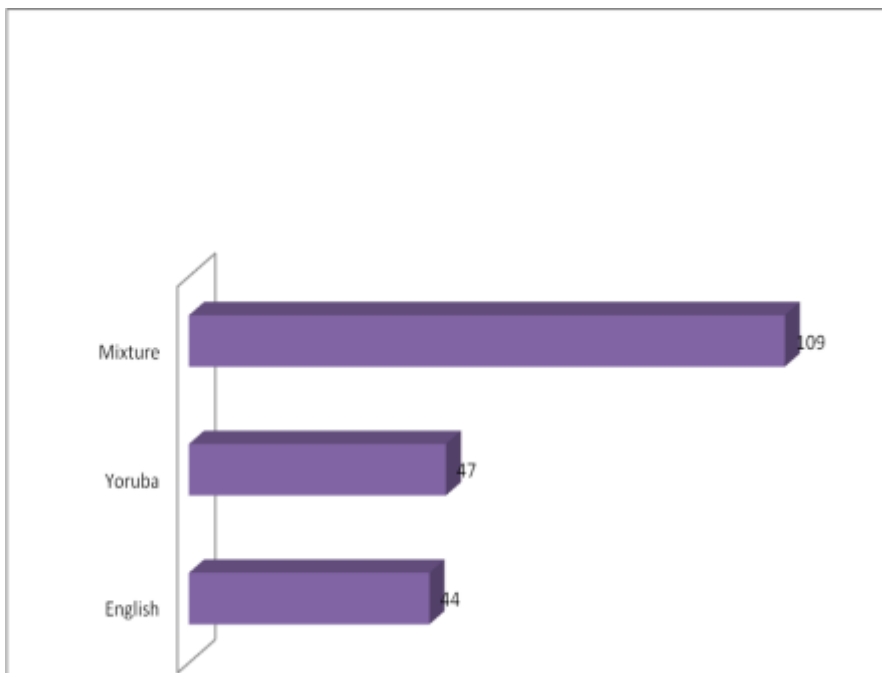


Figure 3 Rate of Code-switching with Parent at Home

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