Can Code Switching Enhance Learners' Academic Achievement?

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Abstract

There has been a high failure rate of Grade 10 learnersin the year end examinations in the Caprivi Education Region of Namibia over a number of years. The objective of this study was to investigate whether the use of mother tongue in English medium classrooms enhanced learners' academic achievement.The study investigated 12 teachers at 12 schools in the Caprivi Education Region. The study found that teachers perceived Code Switching as enhancing academic achievement because it enhanced learners' learning of the English language, improved the way learners answered questions, and that it enhanced teaching and learning of English as a second language. It is believed that learners would be actively involved in their learning, understand the subject matter better and the difficult English concepts would be better interpreted by learners in the language that they fully understand.

Keywords: code switching, medium of instruction, academic achievement, participatory democracy, language proficiency

1. Introduction and Background

Fantini (1985), Genishi (1981) and Huerta (1980) argue that Code Switching should not be seen as a handicap, but rather as an opportunity for children's language development. McClune and Wentz (1975) and Poplack (1981) maintain that Code Switching is good 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. Zentella's (1978) study revealed that children code switched in both oral discourse and written form in order to communicate in an effective way and that parents' Code Switching could be used as a stimulus for further development of children's home language in the home context. Aguirre (1988), Hudelson (1983) and Olmedo-Williams (1983) found Code Switching to be an effective teaching and communicative technique which could be used among bilingual learners. Ahmad and Jusoff (2009) results revealed that learners had a positive perception about their teachers' Code Switching in English Language Teaching.

After independence in 1990, the Namibian educational system advocated participatory democracy in schools, not only in the classrooms, but also outside the classrooms. The new educational system focused on encouraging and recording achievement rather than failure. It advanced the teaching of English as a subject and the use of English as medium of instruction (Ministry of Education and Culture, 1992). The change in the education system meant a change in the language of instruction in schools from Afrikaans medium of instruction in 1990. It must be noted here that prior to independence the majority part of the country used Afrikaans as medium of instruction, while others (Caprivi and Owamboland) used English.

In support of the change in medium of instruction, the Ministry of Education (2007) states that "the overall aim of the teaching of English as a Second Language in Namibian schools is the development of the learners' communicative skills for meaningful instruction in a multi-lingual and multi-cultural society" (p. 3). Specific historical circumstances have led to these distinctive educational choices and second language provisions in the Namibian schools.

Tthe majority of Namibian learners enter junior secondary schools where English is the only medium of instruction with a huge difference between the English vocabularies they know and the English vocabularies they need to master the content subjects in junior secondary schools, this therefore poses a challenge to both teachers and learners. English only classrooms demand from learners to use a special kind of language for learning purposes. Cummins (2000, p. 67) asserts that, "in the context of schooling, discussions to greater or lesser degrees depend on language proficiency or adequacy of an individual's proficiency. Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP) is functional within the context of typical academic tasks and activities". Learners can only progress successfully if their language proficiency in the language of instruction is sufficiently developed to be able to communicate academically. Although many parents and learners may have wanted English as the medium of instruction and learning, many learners struggle to cope academically as they have very little support from parents and more particularly from their schools and teachers. According to Cummins (2000), since learners receive little support from parents and teachers, submersion bilinguals have fewer abilities to understand instruction in the medium of instruction, learners in turn receive fewer benefits from the school and the results show lower academic growth.

In trying to overcome the problem of not being able to understand the content properly and not being able to express themselves adequately through English during the lessons, learners fall back on rote learning or being silent. Venzke (2002, p. 72) suggests that:

Apart from adopting new behaviour patterns at school which are not understood by older family members, learners are frustrated by knowing the answer, but not having the adequate vocabulary to express it, they are pressured by parents and school to learn English quickly and sometimes they are even encouraged to abandon the use of mother tongue completely.

In many instances when learners fail to communicate through the medium of instruction, Code Switching has demonstrated to be an effective teaching and learning technique in schools that use a second language as medium of instruction (Aichum, 2003; Brock-Utne, 2002; Huerta-Macias & Quintero, 1992; Ogechi, 2002; Zabrodskaja, 2007). Additionally, Code Switching is considered to be an extremely important aspect in both cognitive development and social communication (Mishra & Yadav, 2013). In trying to situate the dilemma that most learners who use a second language as medium of instruction in schools experience, Diaz (1983, p. 35) notes the following in his research:

● *Bilingual children are thinking verbally while performing non-verbal tasks;*

● *Bilinguals switch from one language to the other while performing these tasks; and*

● *Bilinguals' habit of switching languages while performing these tasks results in improved task performance.*

Diaz (1983) seems to suggest that if learners are given a task to perform in a second language, the switch to the mother tongue helps them to understand better what the task requires them to do, thereby clarifying doubts or misunderstandings created by the second language. According to Lee (2012), Code Switching brings better learning outcomes than English-only instruction among English Second Language (ESL) learners. The three prototypical approaches to learning as explained by Biggs (1991) in Table 1 are in support of Diaz's line of thinking.

Table 1. Prototypical approaches to learning

Approaches	Motives	Strategy
Surface	Extrinsic: avoid failure, but don't work too hard	Focus on selected details and reproduce accurately
Deep	Intrinsic: satisfy curiosity about topic	Maximise understanding: read widely, discuss, reflect
Achieving	Achievement: compete for higher grades	Optimistic organization of time and effort ('study skills')

(Adapted from Biggs & Moore, 1993, p. 316), three prototypical approaches to learning.

To better explain Diaz's (1983) line of thinking, one has to understand that if learners are forced to learn through a second language, a language in which they have low proficiency, they will either use the surface approach to learning or the achievement approach to learning, rather than the deep approach to learning. Both the surface and achievement approach to learning are characterised by rote learning, while the deep approach to learning

requires one to have an in-depth understanding of what is being learnt. The deep approach to learning cannot be used by those whose language proficiency in the language of instruction is low. According to Biggs (1991), the deep approach to learning is based on intrinsic motivation to understand the strategy and to seek meaning. The learner attempts to relate the content to a personal, meaningful context or to existing prior knowledge, thereby theorising about what is learned, playing with the task by performing hypotheses about how it relates to other known or interesting items and deriving extensions and exceptions.

2. Methodology

Prior to the actual study, the questionnaire was piloted; colleagues approved the reliability of the instrument. The population of this study consisted of Grade 10 English Second Language (ESL) teachers in the then Caprivi Education Region. All teachers in the then Caprivi Educational Region that taught Grade 10 ESL classes formed the population of this study. Purposeful sampling also called criterion sampling was used to select the 12 Grade 10 ESL teachers.

Two research instruments were used to collect data in this study. These were questionnaires and observation checklists. The questionnaire focused on the perceptions of teachers on the use of code switching in English medium classrooms, while the observation checklist assessed how ESL teachers used mother tongue in English medium classrooms.

The analysis of questionnaires and observation checklist were coded and categorised. Sub-categories were established and grouped together as themes. Once themes were identified, they were again coded with numbers and analysed by Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS). In addition, content analysis was used to group responses from the observation checklist into themes and categories to determine the meaning of the participants' views and practices towards Code Switching.

3. Results

3.1 The Effects of Code Switching on Learners' Academic Achievement

The views of teachers as to whether Code Switching had effects on learners' academic achievement are given in Table 2.

Table 2. The effects of code switching on learners' academic achievement

Respondents	Responses
A1	Learners will only understand what is explained when you code switch but won't understand it in English.
A2	Learners' academic achievement will be affected as there are so many different types of languages spoken throughout the nation. There is no communication if people speak different languages.
A3	Both positive and negative. If done to a lesser extent it won't have a negative effect on the improvement of medium of instruction.
A4	Though some psychologists argue that Code Switching improved learners' understanding. I feel Code Switching will positively work well with learners whose English is up to date because they can translate from mother tongue to English.
A5	It enhances the teaching and learning of English as the Second Language
A6	Learners might continuously use code – switching in their writings as well as speaking
A7	Learners are improving in much on their answering of questions in exams
A8	When done regularly and carefully learners can improve their writing skills of words in their mother tongues in activities like essays, letters, etc.
A10	Poor language proficiency, "poor language expression", poor command of the English language and Incorrect interpretation of questions in examinations.
A11	Code Switching produces average speakers of the English language.
A12	Code Switching improves performance of learners.

In answering whether Code Switching had an effect on learners' academic achievement, the 11 ESL teachers gave mixed responses. Five teachers felt that Code Switching had positive effects on learners' academic achievements. They argued that Code Switching enhanced learners' learning of the English language, improved the way learners answered questions, and that it enhanced teaching and learning of English as a second

Language. However, one ESL teacher was adamant that there were many languages spoken in the Caprivi Region and questioned as to which language could be used in mixed mother tongue classrooms and reiterated that the use of Code Switching would hinder communication in the classrooms. Another teacher in the sample argued that learners might carry over Code Switching into their writing, and that Code Switching would lead to poor English proficiency, poor expression and poor command of the English language both spoken and written (see Table 2).

3.2 ESL Teachers' Perceived Advantages of Code Switching

ESL teachers' perceived advantages of Codes Switching are given in Table 3.

Table 3. Teachers' perceived advantages of code switching in English medium classrooms

Respondents	Responses
A1	Learners don't know any of the things in English, especially the ones that make them to Code Switch.
A2	It is ease to explain something for learners to understand better.
A3	Learners get to understand what they couldn't.
A4	The teacher has a few roles in explaining to the learners, learners will take the roles as they can explain.
A5	The teacher receives support which makes teaching even easier, though it would deprive learners from acquiring new vocabulary.
A6	Learners will carry out instructions effectively, keep learners actively involved in the lesson, and understand the subject matter.
A7	It makes teaching easier especially if the mother tongue is spoken by all the learners in the classroom.
A8	Makes the topic easier to understand.
A10	Better explanation of the topics/item, better interpretation, and stimulation and participation.
A11	It benefits the teacher to equip himself with the language techniques, teaches and language proficient.
A12	Opportunity to explain concepts which learners do not understand.

From the responses in Table 3 below, it can be seen that ten of the respondents saw many advantages of Code Switching in English medium schools, ranging from better explanations, better understanding of the content by the learners, better support for teachers to learners carrying out instructions. The respondents further claimed that learners would be actively involved in their learning, understand the subject matter better and the difficult English concepts would be better interpreted by learners in the language that they fully understood.

3.3 Learners and Teachers' Preferred Language of Communication

Even though the majority of Namibian learners are second or third language speakers of English and struggle to communicate through English, the results in Figure 1, show that the majority of learners preferred to communicate in English intheir classrooms as narrated by the ESL teachers.
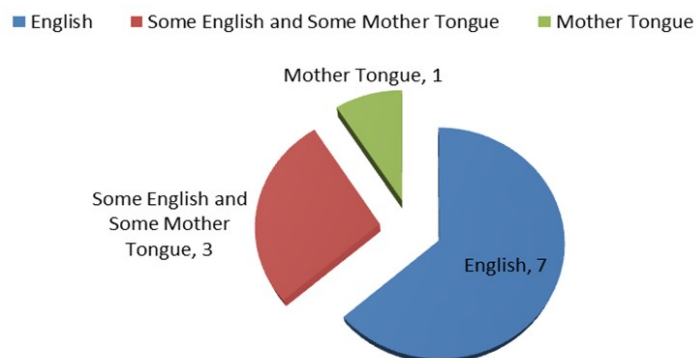

Figure 1. The language in which learners prefer to speak during the English lesson

There was a follow-up question that sought to find out the reasons why learners preferred English language as shown in Figure 1. The teachers in the study gave the following reasons, as shown in Table 4.

Table 4. Teachers' perceived reasons why learners preferred the English language in classroom talk

Respondents	Responses
A1	Because it is the medium through which they should learn the English language.
A2	They lack the vocabulary of the English language that is why they switch to Mother tongue.
A3	For all to understand as it is a multilingual school.
A4	They take it as a must or an instruction that should be used.
A5	They know English is compulsory and knows the benefit of it.
A6	Because they know it's the medium of instruction.
A7	They know it is what the school policy stipulates.
A8	They are allowed to use their mother tongue when working in groups in an English class and they are also willing to know the language better.
A10	Not competent in English.
A11	For easy communication.
A12	No more worried/afraid of making mistakes know what they want to say and how.

In defence of the learners' preference for English, seven ESL teachers indicated that the learners preferred the English language because it was the medium through which they should learn and that they were multilingual schools. However, four ESL teachers argued that learners preferred the local languages because; they lacked the vocabulary of the English language that was why they switched to mother tongue, and that they too allowed mother tongue to be used by learners when working in groups because their learners were not competent in English Figure 2 presents the responses of the teachers participating in the study regarding the language in which they (teachers) preferred their learners to communicate during classroom discussions and interaction.
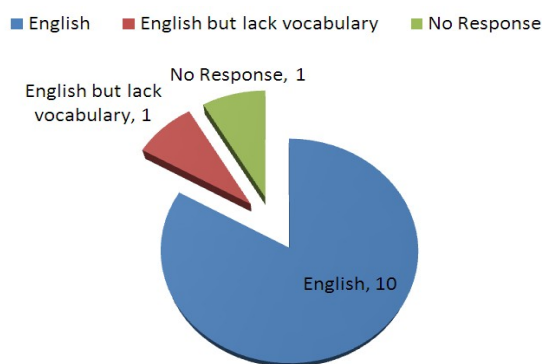

Figure 2. The language in which the teachers preferred the learners to speak

Eleven teachers in the study indicated that they preferred their learners to speak through the medium of English in English medium classrooms. One respondent indicated that though he/she preferred his/her learners to communicate through English when answering and asking questions, his/her learners did not have sufficient English language vocabulary to express themselves on all different aspects required by the curriculum.

In analysing why the teachers preferred their learners to communicate through the medium of English language, the elevenESL teachers gave the following responses (Table 5):

Table 5. Reasons why the teachers preferred learners to use the English language in class

Respondents	Responses
A1	Learners cannot learn English when using other languages.
A2	English is the only medium of instruction /international language used worldwide and is the Official Language in Namibia.
A3	It is a policy that helps learners to improve their spoken and written English.
A4	For learners to understand instructions used in the books, for practice and it is a policy that should be followed.
A5	The content or the books are written in the English language therefore, learners should speak in English.
A6	So that they can practice more and develop their communication skills.
A7	Lessons are in English, therefore learners should learn to express themselves in the English language
A8	All subjects are taught through English, apart from the Silozi language it is therefore good for learners to practice more with the English language.
A10	Practice makes perfect they are tested in English, the Official language, realization of the learning and teaching objectives is in the English language.
A11	Learners are shy and their English vocabulary is poor.
A12	English is the medium of instruction in the Namibian schools.

The responses of teachers in Table 5 contradicts Rowell (cited in Squazzin & Van Graan, 1998) who contends that when and if learners are forced to use a language in which they lack competency, they tend to be silent. Venzke (2002) states that in a classroom where the second language is the only language used, learners tend to fall back on rote learning or being silent, thus defeating meaningful learning. He argues that learners who do not understand what the teacher is saying cannot internalise new knowledge and fall back on memorisation in their content subjects. Venzke supports Biggs (1991) who refers to such type of learning as the surface approach to learning which is basically instrumental or extrinsic. With this approach, learners' main aim is to meet the requirements with the least effort and reproduce facts accurately whether or not they understand them. When learners are pressured by both teachers and the school to learn in a language which is foreign to them, the only way out is to develop learning patterns to please the two institutions. These patterns are either rote learning or being silent. Venzke's view is in line with the situation that many Namibian learners find themselves in. This pattern does not yield good examination results. Dumatog and Dekker (2003) maintain that comprehensible input is mandatory in order for learners to learn in the classroom. They argue that if the learner does not understand the language the teacher uses, he or she cannot learn the subject matter. It is for these reasons that some teachers in this study try to overcome the language problems of their learners by allowing them to code switch. Dumatog and Dekker (2003) state that if learners do not understand the medium of instruction, a language they understand must be used transitionally until a new medium of instruction can be used with comprehension in the classroom.

4. Discussion

Responses on Code Switching ranged from positive to negative, for example; five ESL teachers argued that Code Switching enhanced learners' learning of the English language, improved the way learners answered questions and that it enhanced teaching and learning of the English language. However, there were views that were expressed by teachers A2 and A11 (Table 2) who argued that Code Switching did not enhance academic performance whose views support Krashen (1985) who argued that English should be the sole medium of instruction in classrooms that use English as a second language. He argues further that the use of the first language would detract learners from learning the target language, and that the reason why exposure was not always successful in facilitating proficiency was because learners had access to their first language either in class or outside. This argument is in line with the Communicative Approach which firmly asserts the idea that monolingual teaching with authentic communication in a second language is the best way to learn a language (Pennycook, 1994). Furthermore, linguists, such as Wringe (1989) and Pacek (2003), insist that the target language should be used for all purposes in the classroom and that the first language use actually interfered with the second language learning and brought about 'error transference'. In addition, Polio (1994) claims that using the first language in the classroom was not in accordance with second language acquisition theories, which advocate for modified input and negotiation in a second language as a means of learning.

Learners and teachers' preferred language of communication as perceived by ESL teachers.

With regard to the preferred language of communication, the majority (seven) of ESL teachers said that their learners preferred English and three said they preferred the mixture of mother tongue and English. The arguments presented by these teachers are more normatively-based than research-based. Teachers' preference for English could be attributed to the fact that teachers believed that since English is the official language and that all examinations are written through the medium of English, therefore, it has high status. The teachers' views support Evan and Cleghorn (2014), who argued that it is because of thehistorical high status of English. These teachers' assumption supports Jefferies, (1996), Hornby, (1977), and Roy-Campbell (1996) who argue that the preference for English is common in societies where one language is considered more prestigious socio-economically than the mother tongue which is regarded as inferior. .Although the majority (seven) of the teachers strongly agreed that using one language is beneficial to their learners, they found Code Switching to be more desirable and believed that it made the course easier to understand if Code Switching was utilised. It is important to note here that although teachers appreciated monolingual teaching to strengthen the learners' linguistic competence in English; they perceived Code Switching as a means of strengthening their learners' comprehension in the English language.

5. Conclusion

There are many factors that might lead teachers to code switch and these may include enhancing academic achievement among others. Therefore, Code Switching could be used to help master content subjects and aid teaching and learning. If teachers are assured that they are doing the right thing by Code Switching and are viewed as linguistically competent, their use of Code Switching may accomplish what it is intended for, namely: enhancing teaching, learning and concept clarification. Teachers should decide when first language (L1) should be used and when second language (L2) is appropriate in order to enable comprehension and meaningful involvement of the learners, which ultimately leads to enhancing academic achievement. The Ministryof Education in Namibia should draft and design guidelines on the use of Code Switching in English medium classrooms.

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