The Impact of Code-Switching in the English Language Classroom: A Case Study of Selected Senior Secondary Schools in Botswana

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Abstract

Code-switching in teaching and learning is quite prevalent in educational institutions including at higher and pre-tertiary education in Botswana. This is in spite of the fact that Botswana has a clear language policy with regard to classroom instruction. According to this policy, English is the medium of instruction at those levels of learning except only in Setswana lessons. This paper therefore is aimed at finding out: (1) The extent to which code switching happens in the pre-tertiary (senior secondary schools) English Language classroom, (2) whether it is a deliberate or circumstantial move by the teachers and (3) the impact it has in the teaching and learning process. In carrying out the study, data was gathered from 4 senior secondary schools in the Central Region of Botswana. A questionnaire was given to teachers and Heads of Departments to respond to covering the three objectives of the study. Data was also gathered through document analysis. The findings of the study show that code-switching is not only prevalent in the classroom but also in other fora such as in meetings where teachers engage students. While some of those people engaged in the study feel code-switching is essential as it enhances understanding of issues that are difficult to explain to the learners in English Language, others felt it impedes the learning process on the part of the student. Some teachers code-switch because of their inability to express themselves fluently in English. Based on the research findings, the researchers feel that code-switching has, to some extent, positive and negative impacts in the students' learning.

Keywords: Code-Switching, Teaching, Learning, Second Language

Background of the study

Botswana is a multilingual nation in which more than 20 languages are spoken yet only two, English and Setswana, are officially recognised and taught in the school curriculum. In 1895 when Botswana, the then Bechuanaland, was declared a British Protectorate, the British had also started introducing English to the indigenous people who spoke a variety of languages. This English Language was introduced to people resulting in its teaching in the schools as a second language while in some instances, as a third language.

The aim and objectives of the study

The paper was aimed at exploring circumstances that lead to code-switching in the English language classroom. It specifically seeks to find out:

1. The extent to which code-switching happens in the English Language classroom.
2. Whether it is a deliberate or circumstantial move
3. The impact code-switching has on the teaching and learning process and further (tertiary) education.

Statement of the problem

The teaching of any foreign language or concepts of other subjects in a foreign language by its nature always has its ups and downs. The same is true about the teaching of English Language in Botswana.
because among other challenges, teachers and learners code-switch a lot to the local language. Surprisingly, this even happens at senior secondary where one would have thought that learners have grasped the basics of the English Language for ease of content delivery purely in English. The concern therefore is: Why code-switch, and is it an aid or deterrent in the teaching-learning of English Language? What is the extent to which this phenomenon occurs in the English Language classroom?

Limitations of the study

One of the limitations of the study is the relatively small sample size of the population of the researcher’s respondents. The researcher had wanted to also engage former English language teachers as well but it would have been difficult to do so since was not easy to trace them. This was however complemented with the document analysis.

Another limitation of the study is the non-observation of teachers teaching the subject as this would have given the researcher first-hand information on the matter under investigation. However, this shortcoming too was complemented by the HoDs who the researcher assumed do lesson observation as one of their responsibilities.

Scope of the study

This study focuses on code-switching in the English language classroom in Botswana’s public/government senior secondary schools with participants drawn from the teachers of English Language and Heads of Departments.

Literature review

What code-switching is

Code-switching is when one moves between two or possibly more languages during a verbal discourse (spoken language. According to Johansson (2013), “code-switching is a phenomenon that exists in bilingual societies where people have the opportunity to use two or more languages to communicate” (p.2). In a situation where this phenomenon occurs both the speaker and interlocutor are assumed to be able to speak and understand either two or more languages (bilinguals or multilinguals). Jamshidi and Navehebraim see code-switching as a process whereby there is alternation between two languages within a discourse (2013). This could involve a single word or several, a sentence, or several of them and the audience may be one or more people. Furthermore, Kilfoil and van der Walt (1997) refer to it as changing from one language to another. So, where people speak more than one language, there is most likely going to be an aspect of code-switching and this phenomenon has found its way into the classroom as well.

The extent of code-switching in general and specifically in the English language classroom.

Like in all other former British colonies and some other parts of the world, English Language in Botswana’s schools is taught as a second or even third language as alluded to earlier on. In the public schools, almost all of the teachers of English are Batswana whose first language is Setswana which to some is their third.

Research indicate that the world over a lot of studies have been done on code-switching from a social everyday life. With regard to classroom code-switching, not much has happened as Mokgwathi (2011) says studies on code-switching, especially in this part of the world, “in the classroom is relatively new compared to research on CS in non-formal domains.” (p.53). However, those relating to classroom practice indicate that indeed teachers code-switch a lot were the interlocutors are either bilingual or multilingual. Chimbganda and Mokgwathi (2012) actually buttress this notion by saying “in the field of education, code-switching is a widely observed phenomenon especially in diglossic communities which have two or more distinct languages” (p. 21). It is on the basis of such findings that several questions arise, inter alia:
- Is code-switching a circumstantial move, teaching strategy or an unconscious act?
- Does it yield positive or negative results in the teaching-learning process?
- To what extent does it occur in the classroom?
- Is it proper to code-switch during the teaching-learning process?

Several other questions as raised by Kanwangamalu (1999) are:

What factors contribute to the surface manifestation of CS? Why do bilingual speakers tend to engage in CS? Is there any information that bilingual speakers convey in CS which they cannot convey in any of the languages available to them? In other words, is CS a marker of linguistic deficiency, that is, a strategy that bilingual speakers use to fill gaps in their linguistic repertoire? Is CS random and meaningless? In what domains or settings is CS likely to occur? Is CS limited to informal as opposed to formal speech situations? (p. 257).

Still, many of these studies focus on general classroom code-switching paying attention to a number of subjects, hence the researcher wants to understand how the English Language teacher and other key stakeholders at the school level feel it affects the teaching of English Language at senior school and beyond.

In their studies, which covered a number of subjects at both primary and secondary school Chimbganda and Mokgwathi (2012) found out that although for one class code-switching was prevalent in the content subjects, there was very little or nothing of it when the same class was in an English language lesson. The two researchers actually say

there was hardly any code-switching when the class was doing a comprehension passage on “Man and Animals”. Only four instances of code-switching involving single words or phrases were observed... What is also evident (scrutinize extract 6) is that the English language teacher appears to be more competent in the target language than the other teachers cited earlier (p.29).

While on the one hand, one may commend the English language teachers’ effort, on the other they wonder the extent of English language observations made by the researchers such that a statement of general applicability can be made with regard to code-switching in the English language classrooms.

**Is code-switching a deliberate or circumstantial move?**

Some researchers have attributed code-switching to, among others, the following:

1. teachers’ linguistic deficiencies
2. stressing and or emphasising a point and explaining a point that cannot be explained in the target language
3. initiating a conversation
4. encouraging learners to speak and open up.

Given such reasons for code switching, Chimbganda and Mokgwathi (2012) note that some researchers in Botswana “cast doubt on the wisdom of discouraging authentic code-switching in the classroom” (p.24). The understanding here is that code-switching is a circumstantial or situational move aimed at a good course but some abhor it. That might be a fair statement to make. However, we need to be mindful of the fact that code-switching will only happen during the teaching and learning process but at the end of teaching, students write examinations which are written only in one language. At that moment, there is no code-switching and if the student does not understand, they are doomed.
Code-switching, according to Sert (2005) can be a result of “... the deficiency in linguistic competence of target language ...” (p. 3). So, some teachers code-switch because they do not have competence in the English language. This is unfortunate because as a trained English language teacher, they are expected to have reached a reasonable level of competence to be able to teach secondary school learners.

From a general observation, Chimbganda and Mokgwathi (2012) point out to some scholars who “suggest that code-switching thrives in many classroom situations”(p. 23) despite the shortcomings it has with regard to teaching and learning.

**The impact of code-switching on the teaching and learning of English language and further (tertiary) education for the learners.**

Given the points raised in the foregone parts of this paper, it is evidently clear while some scholars believe that code-switching has a negative impact in the teaching and learning of English, it also has some positives. According to Montague’s and Meza-Zaragosa (1999) “code switching does little to facilitate second language learning and perhaps even discourages it by invalidating the second language of each child in some way” (p. 290). In these authors’ view, code-switching to another language during the course of teaching a second language discredits or weakens the teaching and learning of that second language. This is so because the teacher and the students use another language (first or second local language: Setswana, Ikalanga, etc. in the Botswana case) to teach and learn respectively the second language (English). Given this argument and reference made to Chimbganda and Mokgwathi earlier on, one may say probably code-switching works better for content subjects than those that do not teach content like English and other languages.

Despite arguments such as the one held by Montague and Meza-Zaragosa, Then and Ting (2009) say findings of their research “suggest that in circumstances where students’ proficiency in the instructional language is lacking, code-switching is a necessary tool for teachers to make their messages more comprehensible to students” (p. 12). Their feeling is that switching to another language (Interlocutors’ other language) is necessary and helpful to the students in instances where students’ competencies in the language used for instruction are inadequate. But whenever this happens, one always wonders as to whether it is a result of students’ lack of competencies, the teacher’s linguistic inability or the teacher failing to come to the level of the students.

Code-switching can also work against learners when they go for tertiary education because at that level, a good number of trainers and or lecturers are expatriates and not conversant with the local language. This therefore leaves no room for code-switching.

One of the aims of the Botswana Senior Secondary English Language Assessment Syllabus (1999) is to “develop the ability to use English for effective communication” (p. 2) and this means being able to read, write, speak and listen to effectively, to all discourse in English including in examinations.

**Methodology**

The researchers employed both qualitative and quantitative approach. With the qualitative approach, the researchers aimed to get thorough understanding of the situation because it (the approach) digs deep into the participants’ views and ways of doing things (Baker, 1999). On the other hand, quantitative approach was meant to yield numerical data.
A case study was used in the study. A case study refers to an investigation of a contemporary issue or phenomenon (Bell, 2003). This means studies of this nature are a reflection of what goes on in real life situation with the aim of understanding the phenomenon or issue. And researchers say teachers continue to experience code-switching in the classrooms. As Baker (1999) puts it, such is a situation which when investigated, researchers try to find out why and how it has and continues to happen. A lot of literature point to cases of or situations of code-switching in the classroom as alluded to earlier. Zainal (2007) points out that a “case study research, through reports of past studies, allows the exploration and understanding of complex issues” (p. 1). This is true of this study because it tries to explore issues surrounding code-switching.

Open-ended and closed ended questions were administered to the teachers and Heads of Departments (HoDs) to collect data. Withal to that, documents on the matter under investigation were analysed.

So, this case study has shown why there is code-switching in the senior secondary school English language in contravention to a policy that English language is to be used as a medium of instruction from standard 2 (Revised National Policy on Education, 1994).

The study was carried out in four (4) of the nine (9) public senior secondary schools in the Central Region of Botswana. Random sampling was used to select those schools. Seven (7) of these schools are located in big villages, one (1) in a town and another in an isolated area about 10 kilometres outside a small village. Those schools have a total of seventy (70) English Language teachers (+ or -10) and about twenty (20) Heads of Departments. From these numbers, eight (8) teachers and three (3) Heads of Departments from each of the four schools were given the questionnaire to respond to.

Two sets of participants in this study were teachers of English Language and Heads of Departments. All of the teachers of were Batswana who speak both Setswana and English, some speaking a third language. The same applied to the learners in these schools.

Both sets of respondents provided first-hand information regarding their experience. The latter were roped in because as supervisors of the former they provide information relating to what they observe during class visits for lesson observations. Random sampling was used for the selection of the respondents.

Qualitative data were condensed and analysed according to the 4 open-ended questions which centered around the three research questions.

**Analysis and discussion**

**Demographic information**

The tables above show that all the participants were professionally trained teachers. In terms of academic and professional qualification, all have the minimum required to teach at senior secondary school. This shows that the schools are staffed with trained personnel.
Table 1: Demographic information for teachers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Age range</th>
<th>No. of yrs teaching English</th>
<th>Highest teaching qualification</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>25 and below</td>
<td>26-30</td>
<td>31-35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

28 questionnaires were distributed. Of these 28, 25 were returned but 3 were not.

Table 2: Demographic information for Heads of Departments (HoDs)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Age range</th>
<th>No. of years as HoD</th>
<th>Highest teaching qualification</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>25 and below</td>
<td>26-30</td>
<td>31-35</td>
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<tr>
<td>Male</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

12 questionnaires were distributed and they were all returned.
Teachers and Heads of Departments’ response from closed-ended questions

Of the 25 teachers who participated in the study, a total of 17 (68%) said that they code-switch in their lessons. All the 12 Heads of Departments (HoDs) also say there is code-switching in the English language classroom. So, to a large extent, there is code-switching in the English Language classroom.
As to whether they would say code-switching enhances teaching and learning, 20 (80%) of the teachers said it does not. Similarly, more respondents from the HoDs, 8 (67%), also said it does not enhance teaching and learning than those who said it does not. From these responses, it is clear that although code-switching can be said to aid learning, it also deters it in some way.

With regard to its impact at secondary and tertiary education, 20 (80%) of the teachers and all the HoDs say it adversely affects students’ learning. This relates to the respondents’ responses that code-switching at the basic education level (secondary school level) lays a weak foundation in English language acquisition which in the end negatively affects learning at tertiary.

22 (88%) and 9 (75%) of the teachers and HoDs respectively do not believe that code-switching is a good strategy for learning English Language. Both teachers and HoDs feel code-switching dilutes the teaching and acquisition of English and the teaching and learning of other subjects whose medium of instruction is English.

Whether teachers code-switch consciously or not, 21 (84%) and 6 (50%) of the teachers and HoDs respectively felt it is happens consciously in the classroom. The rest felt it is an unconscious and automatic act. This deliberate act may either be a result of the teacher’s deficiency in English or that of the learners as pointed out in the literature review section and confirmed by the respondents in their response to the open-ended questions.

Regarding the notion that native speakers of the English Language are the best teachers of the language, the majority of the teachers 16 (64%) believe so. In the contrary, 9 (75%) of the HoDs say that is not necessarily the case. This could be an indication that teachers lack self-belief in their teaching of English as a second language.

**Responses to the open-ended questions.**

Teachers’ and Heads of Departments’ responses were pulled together since they were asked the same questions and this is how they responded:

1. **If teachers of English Language generally code-switch, under what circumstances do you think they do so? In other words, why do you think they do so?**

   An assortment of circumstances under which teachers normally code-switch was given. Many of the respondents pointed to teachers’ linguistic deficiency as one of those circumstances. They are of the view that teachers who code-switch are found wanting when it comes to expressing themselves in the English language. This is what Sert (2005) said as indicated in the literature review.

   Still some teachers are said to be code-switching because they say they explain some concepts which students fail to understand if done in English especially low achievers. Then and Ting (2009) confirm this in their findings that sometimes when teachers code-switch, it because of the students’ inadequate linguistic proficiency in the target language. With such reasoning, one can deduce that the teacher fails to come to the level of the students. Furthermore, teachers are said to be code-switching.

2. **How do you think code-switching affects the teaching and learning of English language (either positive or negative) especially that English is used to teach most other subjects?**

   All of the respondents felt that there is more harm than good brought about by code-switching in the English Language classroom and learning in teaching of other subjects in general. With code-switching, respondents felt that learners never really become proficient in the target language because they have exposure to a mixture of English and their first or other local language in the English language lesson. They also said the other effect becomes pronounced in students’ written work including assessment. In fact, one of them said, “students will never use Setswana in English language tests and Exams”. This clearly means that during written
and even oral assessment, there is no room for code-switching because is entirely the student’s without the teacher’s intervention and it has to be in English.

On another note, a few respondents felt that some positives of code-switching are that indeed, some concepts are understood better by students when explained in their first language. This is what Chimbaganda and Mokgwathi (2012) notes about some researchers who speak against code-switching even in situations where it is used for a good purpose.

3. **If there is code-switching in the senior secondary school classroom, how would you say it affects form 5 school leavers when pursuing tertiary education?**

One point that was mentioned by at least 75% of the respondents was that at the tertiary level of education, a good number of lecturers and trainers are expatriates who do not know the local language. As such, learners used to code-switching may find it difficult to cope when lectured for or trained by such lecturers or trainers.

4. **In what other fora do teachers in general code-switch?**

Apart from code-switching in the classroom, the respondents said teachers do it a lot in instances such as formal staff meetings and assembly sessions.

**Conclusion and recommendations**

In light of the findings of this study, the conclusion that can be drawn is that there is a feeling among teachers that code-switching brings more harm than good to the teaching and learning not only of the English language but to other subjects as well in which the medium of instruction is supposed to be English language. Code-switching results in the declining proficiency of the English language learning by the learners although it brings with it some positives into the English language classroom and learning in general.

**Suggestions for future research**

Future research on students’ perceptions of code-switching in the classroom not only of English Language but other subjects as will be beneficial to classroom instruction.

**References**


