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Table of Contents

| | |
|--|-----|
| Editorial board | i |
| Preface | ii |
| Editorial comment | iii |
| Table of contents | iv |
| 1 Estimation of serum levels of creatinine, sodium, potassium and urea in diabetes mellitus patients: Saidu, A.N., and Afolabi, S.M | 1 |
| 2 Phytochemical, Antimicrobial and Antiplasmodial Screening of <i>Cochlospermum Tinctorium</i> : A.A., Jigam and H.O., Akanya | 4 |
| 3 Elevated Proteinuria in Hypertensive Patients Resident in Minna Metropolis, Nigeria : A.A., Jigam | 8 |
| 4 Bacterial Generation of Biogas: A Review: A. A. Abdul-Rahman | 14 |
| 5 Monitoring Atmospheric Heavy Metal Depositon in Abuja Municipality Using an Epiphitic Moss- <i>Polytricum formosum</i> : S.E Kakulu and J.O. Jacob | 21 |
| 6 Preliminary phytochemical and antimicrobilal screening of <i>ficus exasperata vahl</i> (sandpaper): M. N. Ndamitso, B. E. N. Dauda, A. I. Ajai, and O. A. R. Odewale | 26 |
| 7 A Dynamic System Model For Two-Three Species Food Webs Using Simultaneuosly 2-Prey And 1-Predator:B. Gbolahan | 31 |
| 8 Design, Construction And Characterisation Of Thirty- Two Output Multiple Pattern Moving Display System: J.A., Ezenwora | 37 |
| 9 Comparison of Hydraulic Conductivity Results Obtained From Trends Lines of Linear with Logarithmic and Polynomial Regression:A. N., Baba-Kutigi | 49 |
| 10 Synthesis of Substituted Tetrahydro - β -Carbolines: B.E.N. Dauda | 56 |
| 11 Electrical Conductivity Measurements of Mixed Compounds of Silver and Lithium Sulphates: U. Ahmadu, and N.I. Ilariharan | 63 |

| | | |
|-----|---|-----|
| 12 | Determination of Copper, Lead and Zinc Concentrations in Roadside Soils of Two Major Highways in Minna Metropolis: J.O Jacob, Y.B Paiko and O. Olakunle | 69 |
| 13. | Impact of Trace Metals Discharged From Tannery Industries On Challawa River In Kano, Northern Nigeria : J. Yisa; E. B Agbaji, and E. M. Okonkwo. | 75 |
| 14. | Extraction and Physico-Chemical Characterisation of Shea Nut Oil: Y.B., Paiko, B.E.N. Dauda, P. Nwakuba, and P. Olayiwola | 82 |
| 15 | Worker assessment of problems of leadership efficiency in achieving organizational goals and objectives: a study of selected organizations in Minna, Niger State.: A. Chike-Okoli | 86 |
| 16 | Codeswitching in the Nigerian University Environment : F.C. Chike-Okoli, | 93 |
| 17 | Counselling as a Helping Relationship: Implications for Meaningful Living in the Society: K. I. Ibrahim, | 100 |
| 18 | Assessing the Effects of Designed Instructional Model on Students' Performance in Science (Biology) : C.C., Nsofor, | 105 |
| 19 | The Effect of Learning Styles on Academic Achievement in Secondary Schools: Implication for Counselling : I. N. Mogbo | 112 |
| 20 | The Place of Instructional Media Technology in the Teaching-Learning Process: A Challenge to Science Teachers in the New Education Reforms: C.S, Gana | 119 |
| 21 | Improving the Teaching of Vocational Technical Education to Achieve Industrial and Technological Development : S. M Tswana | 124 |
| 22 | Assessment of Housing and Environmental Condition (A case study of Maikunkele in Niger State) : M. B. Yunusa | 132 |
| 23 | Design and Construction of Solar Energy –Operated Inverter Suitable For School Laboratory and Rural Development Activities in Niger State: E. Raymond, | 137 |
| 24 | Appraisal of Maintenance Culture in Engineering Laboratories of A Nigerian University: Implications For Technology Development : B.N Atsumbe | 143 |

| | | |
|-----|---|-----|
| 25 | Effective Strategies for Teaching and Learning of Mathematics in Secondary Schools: R. W. Gimba | 151 |
| 26 | Attitude of Urban and Rural Technical College Students Towards Technical Education in Niger State : I. Ibrahim | 157 |
| 27. | Integrating The World Wide Web Into The Classroom: Prospects and Challenges in the Nigerian Setting : A. Ndanusa | 160 |
| 28 | Mathematical Model and Its Application to the Spread of Measles Pandemic: J. Mohammed and O. F. Oluyomi | 165 |
| 29 | Effects of Socialization on Achievement in Secondary School Social Studies: A. O. Umeh | 169 |
| 30 | Human Capacity Training For Security of Life, Property and Investment: A Challenge For Estate Management Education: N. U. Bassey | 175 |
| 31 | Industrial Employers Involvement in Youth Apprenticeship Through Work- Based Learning Experiences for Universities.: J. F., Maigida | 182 |
| 32 | The Status Of Chemistry Laboration In Some Secondary Schools In Minna Niger State: A. Nathaniel | 190 |
| 33 | Environmental Security in Nigeria: The Role of Science and Technology: J. Musa | 196 |
| 34 | A Survey of Some High Performance Variants of the Euler Method :A, Ochoche | 200 |

Codeswitching in the Nigerian University Environment

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Abstract: Codeswitching has been defined as a total shift from one language to another within the same discourse. Codeswitching in language parlance is one of the phenomena that determine the level of complexity of expressions of different languages in a given situation. The focus in this paper is to determine in what ways codeswitching affects the competence of the learner of a second language in the Nigerian university, especially those offering English Language under General Studies. It is generally believed that English Language learners who often use the mother tongue outside the classroom reduce their chances of achieving competence in the target language. Our study here reveals that University students who switch codes do so to the detriment of the target language. The paper therefore suggests that an intensive awareness programme be mounted for students on the dangers of codeswitching right from secondary school so as to redirect them toward the target language.

Introduction

English language teachers in the Nigerian universities are concerned about the indiscriminate use of the mother tongue instead of English language code in the university environment. To an average highly placed Nigerian, it is evident that there is currently a greater incidence of deviation from the accepted norms of correctness than there were in past years. University students adopt all kinds of strategies for communication among which is code switching. With the adoption of English language as the national official language in 1947 in the popular Richard's constitution, (Olapade, 1987:73), English language teachers have engaged themselves in activities aimed at teaching and promoting English language acquisition and usage in the society. Developmental English language courses as in Remedial and General Studies English language programmes have been mounted and vigorously pursued within and without the university environment. One of the objectives of such English language courses, according to Oluikpe and Nwaegbe (1979:257), is "to equip the student with the tool of effective communication so that in his own essay writing and public speaking, he will use appropriate and exact words, construct correct and meaningful sentences and organize his thoughts into effective paragraph units towards achieving the various purposes of communication". In

line with this objective, English language teachers will naturally expect their efforts to result in a widespread ability to use English language effectively both inside the classroom environment and outside of it. Environment here represents the confines of the university.

It is believed that English language learners who often use the mother tongue or any other language outside the classroom situation reduce the chances of achieving competence in the target language code. It is a general expectation that university students would conduct their discussions more often in the target language at least in the university environment. Regrettably, this is not always the case. Rather than apply the target language code (English language), a great number of students switch from the English language to the native language, and vice versa, during their discussions. This is why this study is interested in the causes of code switching and its consequences for language learning. It is hoped that by the end of the study, solution would have been reached to at least minimize this incidence of code switching especially in the university environment. The focus of this study is the Federal University of Technology, Minna.

The concept of code switching

Code switching is a linguistic situation in which a bilingual individual alternates language codes in a given

discourse. According to Todd and Hancock (1986:117) code switching refers to a speaker's ability to move from one variety of language to another in response to people or event. Oluga, Adewusi, Babalola (1998:18) described code switching as "a socio-linguistic habit of bilingual and multilingual individuals involving interlarding of different languages in speech or writing". According to them, it is a total shift from one language to another within the same context. Code switching is a very common phenomenon in bilingual societies in which an individual enjoys the freedom of language choice. This phenomenon seems to occur more among youths especially those in the university where there are a diversity of native language groups.

A student whose mother tongue is the Igbo language can switch from the Igbo language to English or vice versa. For instance:

Kedu maka your health? (How is your health?)

Nyem my money. (Give me my money).

Let us hear, *nwokem*. (Let us hear my man).

A student whose mother tongue is Hausa language can switch from Hausa language to English language. For instance:

Zan je Kasuwa, immediately after my lunch. (I will go to the market immediately after my lunch).

Bani kudi na before I call the police. (Give me my money before I call the police).

A student whose mother tongue is Nupe language can switch from Nupe language to English language. For instance:

La ewo yami before I lose my temper. (Give me the money before I lose my temper).

Bami takada we ngba before the examination. (Lend me your book to read before the examination).

This type of code switching and, sometimes code mixing is fast gaining patronage among undergraduates. In Igbo parlance, it is popularly known by speakers as *Englilbo*, meaning a blend of English and Igbo languages.

Purpose of Study

The purpose of this study is to find answers to questions raised in the mind of teachers of English language on the issue of code switching in the university environment. Causes and effects of code switching on language acquisition and usage will also be examined.

Therefore, among the questions the university students will provide answers to are:

- i. Why students switch codes in the university environment instead of using the target code only;
- ii. Whether there are other speech events or certain types of situations where they do not code-switch;
- iii. How the students themselves view the code switching habit;
- iv. Whether code switching affects English language acquisition and if yes, how;
- v. Whether code switching has anything to do with the quality and quantity of target language use.

Methodology

This study took place at the Federal University of Technology, Minna, Nigeria, where English language is taught as a second language in the General Studies Department. Only 100 level students who are bilingual formed the population out of which samples were drawn. Multilingual students were excluded.

The questionnaire formed the major instrument of data collections for this study. Forty copies of a nineteen item questionnaire were administered on forty randomly selected bilingual students from different linguistic backgrounds.

There were few open-ended questions to ensure freedom of expression

of opinions and there were also closed-ended questions where several options were given. All the questions were designed to meet the purpose of the study.

Review

The essence of language teaching is to impart the desired code in the learners. It is also expected that language learners would take advantage of this to acquire and improve the skills learnt. One of the ways of doing this is a willingness and readiness to apply the desired code in their discussions and other activities within and outside the learning environment. Practice, they say, makes perfect. It is by way of practice that proficiency can be achieved. The learning of a second language does not and should not end in the classroom but should extend to usage outside the classroom environment. Thus, a second language acquires meaning by being used to identify objects and things around the learner.

Unfortunately, what seems to have overtaken the Nigerian university environment is a blend of the mother tongue and the English language. Students are often seen and heard switching from one language code to the other during conversation. Teachers and researchers have on the whole been concerned about minimizing code switching in language learners taking it that the switch either indicates a failure to learn the target second language or an unwillingness to do so. A situation where students come out of an English language class and go ahead to discuss or converse in their own native languages, generally indicates that something is wrong somewhere – either with the lesson itself or with the students. Cummins and Swain (1986:105) contend that “progress in the second language is facilitated if only one code is used” both inside and outside the classroom. They also stated that teachers who use the target code exclusively tend to counteract the attraction to the native language. This is also true of students who exclusively use

the target code. They tend to get used to using it as they use it now and again. Eldridge (1996:310) argued against this line stressing that the manifestation of code switching can be analysed in terms of inter language. He said that “code switching is developmental and any premature attempt to reduce its use would thus impede second language acquisition”. This is one of the explanations he gave after a study where he proposed that “code switching appeared to be a natural and purposeful phenomenon, which facilitates both communication and learning”.

In a detailed study in which he intended to find out why students code switched in a Turkish Secondary School and what consequences it had for their second language, a number of issues emerged. 24% of the sample cases studied showed that they code switched because the required item in the target code was simply unknown. In his words, the respondents gave the following answer. “Because when I speak English sometimes I don’t know the word and I use a native word” (Eldridge, 1996:305).

Another issue that emerged from Eldridge’s study is that code switching functions as “in-group” identity. “It may seem to be a refusal to commit oneself to all the obligations of being foreign while maintaining the right to be in the school to learn target code” (Eldridge, 1996:305).

However, Wardhaugh (1986:102) stated that “solidarity with listeners, choice of topic and perceived social and cultural distance... are products of the sometime unconscious motivation of the speaker.. apparently many speakers are not aware that they have used one particular variety of a language rather than another or sometimes even that they have switched languages”. He also noted that certain social situations may require that one code be used rather than another, even though that second code is known to all participants but the first only to some. Nevertheless, Wardhaugh, (1986:100) attributed code switching to the fact that

"most speakers command several varieties of any language they speak, and bilingualism, even multilingualism is the norm for many people throughout the world rather than unilingualism. People then, are usually forced to select a particular code whenever they choose to speak, and they may also decide to switch from one code to another...." In his own study, Preston (1989:38) stressed that "a change of topic or some other variable seems to account clearly for the switch to another code". He suggested that this type of language shift is affected to meet social demands particularly in bilingual environments.

Oluga, Adewusi, Babalola (1998:20) similarly highlight factors affecting code switching which included bilingualism. According to them, "the ability to speak two or more languages by the communicators or the need to display their competence in these languages has been identified as the basic factor responsible for code-mixing and code switching among communicators". They also identified 'context' as another factor determining code switching. In their study they showed that code switching usually occurred in an informal context or setting or environment. They noted it was rare and inappropriate in formal settings, like news broadcasts, public lectures, job interviews, official and formal communication situations. Among other factors, Oluga, Adewusi, Babalola (1998:20-21) also identified the topic of discussion and the status of discussants as affecting code switching. They are of the opinion that in the field of law, Latin expressions can be used to express ideas, in the field of Biology, Greek or Latin names are given as the botanical or zoological names of plants and animals, in African culture and tradition, some indigenous words do not have English interpretations and are brought in like that into the speech code. Also, people of the same status and rank can code-switch easily without being misunderstood. They also found out that

the relationship between participants affect code switching irrespective of status variation. Close participants like a husband and wife, brother and sister or friends, will easily switch codes in the course of discussion.

Another factor identified with code switching is when people want to prevent others from understanding exactly what they discuss, they will switch codes in order to monopolize the discussion. "Incompetence" is another factor identified by Oluga, Adewusi & Babalola (1998:21) as affecting code switching. Inability to use the language of discussion effectively and efficiently may cause code switching in an attempt to explain concepts or ideas better especially where there is no other alternative.

On whether there is any relationship between the level of achievement in the target code and the use of code switching strategies, Eldridge (1996:310) concluded that "there may be a strong relationship between learner styles and abilities and code switching". According to him, "when they are forced to, some learners can function quite comfortably in the target language without code switching even at relatively early age". He pointed out, however, that no relationship exists between level of achievement in the target language and use of code switching strategies. High achieving and/or intelligent students code-switch as well as others. To assume that the highly competent students in the target language code-switch to the native language less than others may not be correct.

Nevertheless, it is only appropriate that formal situations should require formal target codes but informal settings may experience code switching here and there. But when code switching takes over a learner's speech domain, fossilization sets in and the acquisition of the target code is endangered.

In brief, there is no doubt that code switching exists in the university

environment and the writer does not think that the trend can enhance second language learning. Our English language learning activities must be protected from local and sub-standard language pollutions. This is why this paper will assess the causes and effects of code switching among university undergraduates with a view to finding solutions to them.

Analysis of Data Collected

Out of 40 questionnaires administered only 38 were properly filled and returned. Only 33 out of the 38 respondents indicated that they code-switch within the university environment while 5 indicated that they do not. All respondents are monolingual native language speakers who learned to speak English as a second language. 8 respondents are females while 25 are males. Only those who indicated that they code-switch were studied. Out of 33 respondents who indicated they code switch, 8 (24.2%) said they code switch very often, 6(18.2%) said they code switch often and 12 (36.4%) said "not often". 7(21.2%) were 'uncertain' how often they switch codes.

On why they code-switch, various options were given them to choose from. 13 (39.4%) of the respondents code-switch because they "don't want certain people to understand what they say". 10 (30.3%) said it is because "it has become part of them while 10 (30.3%) others said they do it unconsciously". Only 8 (24.2%) said they code-switch because "they could not say everything" they wanted to say in English language, while 6 (18.2%) said they were "afraid of making mistakes" in English language so they code-switch to cover up errors. 7 (21.2%) of respondents said they code switch to keep their "local languages alive" while 5 (15.1%) said they code-switch whey they "don't know the right words to use in English". On whether there are situations where they will not switch codes within the university

environment, 16 (48.5%) respondents said 'Yes' while 17 (51.5%) of them said 'No'. Out of the 16 respondents who said 'Yes', 10 (62.5%) would not switch codes in the lecture hall while 3 (18.7%) said they do not code-switch when talking to a stranger and 2 (12.5%) do not code switch when addressing a meeting. 1 (6.2%) will not code-switch when he visits an officer of the university in the office. On how they feel about code switching, 18 (54.5%) out of the 33 respondents said it is normal to code-switch while 15 (45.5%) others are contrary to that. On the effects of code switching on their spoken English, 20 (60.6%) respondents said code switching affects their spoken English competence negatively while 13 (39.4%) respondents said it does not affect them at all.

On the effect of code switching on their English language examinations, 15 (45.5%) out of 33 respondents said it does not affect their performance in examinations while 18 (54.5%) said it does affect their performance. Concerning their own attitude to code switching, 19 (57.6%) respondents said they do not feel comfortable switching codes while 11 (33.3%) respondents are comfortable with it and 3 (18.7%) respondents are silent on this. Generally, out of all the 33 respondents studied, 28 (84.8%) said it is possible to avoid code switching while 5 (15.2%) contradicted this.

Summary

From the analysis of data, the findings are summarized as follows:

- i. Students vary in their responses on why they switch codes within the university environment but the majority opinion is that they code-switch to prevent certain people from understanding what they say. This is followed by those who code-switch because it has become part of their speech pattern. They are followed by those who do so 'unconsciously'. Only a small percentage said they code-switch

because they could not say everything they wanted to say in English language. There are various other reasons given why they code switch. The writer therefore believes that students derive some intrinsic satisfaction from code switching since it meets the purpose for which it is used.

- ii. The fact that there are some speech events/situations where some respondents will not code-switch is an indication that code switching is not hereditary in them and that they can choose not to code-switch. Others still who will switch-code anywhere imply that they have also made a choice to code-switch anywhere.
- iii. Majority of respondents feel code switching is normal which means that code switching is an accepted speech pattern among them and is gradually taking over their speech culture. However, there are still some who know that there is an accepted English language standard.
- iv. Code switching affects English language acquisition and performance in the examinations of a majority of respondents negatively. In this respect, it becomes necessary to discourage code switching right from the early years of education. Many of them believe that code switching is not an unavoidable phenomenon. A majority of the respondents are average performers in English language examinations.

Implications

Teaching and learning aims that the target code will be used by learners in their daily conduct of affairs within and outside the university. If code switching is purposeful, learners can also be taught to achieve the same purpose using the target code. So, educationists have to find out

what these purposes are and focus on English for Specific Purpose (ESP). If the English language syllabus at the primary and secondary school levels lays emphasis on ESP, most of the students' communication needs would be met even from that early stage.

While it may seem that certain code switching habits are developmental and therefore transient, it should not be taken for granted. In the monolingual situation, as the one studied, if the target code strategies and functions are not attended to at the early stage, fossilization may occur in form of code switching. In that state, the learners are at a disadvantage linguistically when they meet a target language situation and there, code switching may persist.

Recommendation

In view of the study above, it is recommended that English for Specific Purposes (ESP) should begin at a relatively early stage of education to avoid environmental influences that take their toll on the target language acquisition of learners. This should go hand in hand with the teaching of grammar at that stage. Secondly, adequate awareness should be created to bring home the eventual detrimental consequences of code switching on target language acquisition and usage both in the immediate and distant time. This paper also recommends that workshops and exhibitions be included in the school curriculum to enable students see and interact with the environment using the accepted target code. This can also reduce incidents of code switching among learners of English language.

Conclusion

Code switching must be fought as a monster and cankerworm both in the learners' home front and in the school programmes beginning from the primary school right to the tertiary institution as code switching is capable of eroding the

progress pursued in the English language teaching and learning programme.

Parents must ensure that their children use only the accepted correct forms of English language for communication at home right from their early learning stage. Children need to be exposed to reading only materials written in the acceptable communicative forms in addition to educating them on the inherent effects of code switching on their communicative competence in future. This will go a long way in complimenting school language programmes. This study believes that the collective efforts of the home, the learner, and the school will adequately combat this problem.

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