NIGERIAN LANGUAGE POLICY, MOTHER-TONGUE AND TEACHING ENGLISH LANGUAGE IN LOWER BASIC CLASSES: TOWARDS USING CODE-MIXING

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Abstract
Despite commonly attestable research and classroom evidence of the awesome results of using mother-tongue for teaching, many language educators are still skeptical about, and condemn the use of learners' mother-tongues in teaching them a second or foreign language. This paper explores how code-mixing can help the teacher overcome some language-based classroom challenges. It is quite interesting that Nigeria's language policy allows for the use of mother-tongue or the language of the immediate environment in educating the child. It specifically stipulates that the medium of instruction at the primary school shall be the mother-tongue or the language of the immediate environment, while English shall be taught as a subject. It is with efficient and consistent teaching of mother-tongues the potentials of learners' indigenous languages could be harnessed and realized. Therefore, the teacher at the lower basic education level is expected to make good use of the mother-tongue or the language of the immediate environment as the medium of instruction in teaching English Language and other school subjects. Given the hard linguistic task for this teacher, it is imperatively needful to create and sustain reasonable avenues for this teacher to effectively navigate between English language and the mother-tongue or language of the immediate environment.

Keywords: *Nigerian language policy, Mother-tongue, Immediate environment language, Code-mixing, Lower basic classes*

Introduction
Research has proven that in the process of teaching a foreign language, the teacher's use of mother-tongue can influence the learner's acquisition of the target language (Atkinson, 1987; Harbord, 1992; Cummins, 2001; William & Baohua, 2011). Throughout the history of English language teaching and second language acquisition, the role of mother-tongue has been evidently affirmed, with the benefits commonly realized. Teaching English as a second language for the lower basic education classes in Nigeria is far from being effective, given the numerous factors that impede success in the classroom. To that end, this paper seeks to (re)examine Nigeria's language policy (LP) and its implementation and the challenges of teaching English in Nigeria, especially in the lower basic classes. It also seeks to demonstrate how code-mixing can be used to mediate the challenges of teaching English as a subject at the lower basic education in the multilingual Nigerian nation. Its conceptual concern is offering a brief on the concepts of mother-tongue (MT), language of immediate environment (LIE) and code-mixing.

Situating Nigerian Language Policy in National Policy on Education

It could be argued that Nigeria has no language policy, as there is no document designated as such. What could be termed Nigeria's language policy is deduced from the *Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria* (1999) and the *National Policy on Education* (2013). These documents have categorized the different stages at which the indigenous languages and the English language would be used for instruction. Section 55 of the 1999 Constitution stipulates that "The business of the National Assembly shall be conducted in English and in Hausa, Ibo and Yoruba when adequate arrangements have been made." Section 97states that:

> The business of a House of Assembly shall be conducted in English, but the House may, in addition to English, conduct the business of the House in one or more other languages spoken in the state as the House may by resolution approve.

Section 1and Sub-section 8 (g) of the *National Policy on Education* (NERD, 2014) states, "Every child shall be taught in the mother-tongue or in the language of the immediate community for the **first four years** of basic education. In addition, it is expected that every child shall learn one Nigerian language." Also, Section 2 and sub-section 20 (d) states, "The medium of instruction in the primary school shall be the language of the immediate environment for the **first three years** in monolingual communities. During this period, English shall be taught as a subject" (NERD, 2014). Given the foregoing, reference is usually made to these two distinct yet somewhat similar concepts, mother-tongue and language of the immediate community, and two different durations for the use of the mother-tongue or language of the immediate environment. Evidently, there is inconsistency as well as ambiguity in these stipulations, which pose some implementation challenges on the basis language choices.

Mother-Tongue and Language of the Immediate Environment

Mother-tongue is a vague concept. The terms associated with the term 'mother-tongue' include *first language, dominant language, home language, language of the immediate community, language of the immediate environment* and *native tongue. Be it as it may, these terms are not synonyms*. The vagueness of this term has led some researchers to claiming that different connotative meanings of the term 'mother-tongue' vary according to the intended usage of the word. The mother tongue denotes not only the language one learns from one's mother, but also the speaker's dominant and home language. That is, it does not merely imply only the first language according to the time of acquisition, but the first with regard to its importance and the speaker's ability to master its linguistic and communicative aspects (Nordiquist, 2019).

The above assertion has been given credence by Onuigbo and Eyisi (2009), who have noted that the terms associated with the mother-tongue are only technical in the sense that '…they represent a language in which one has the greatest linguistic and intuitive knowledge result from a psychological disposition…' This implies that mother-tongue does not really mean the language of one's mother; neither does first language means one's first language in chronological order. Yet, it is not contradictory to say that for many people, their mother-tongue is sequentially the first language to be acquired. That is, such people acquired their mother-tongue first before acquiring any other second language. Essentially, mother-tongue, language of the immediate environment, native language, etc. are the languages embodying the culture of the individual.

Conceptualizing Code-Mixing and Code Switching

Code-mixing and code-switching are consequences of bilingualism. It is the use of two codes in speech situations. Some scholars use the terms 'code-mixing' and 'code-switching' inter-changeably.

Others assume more specific definitions of code-mixing, which may be different in different subfields of Linguistics, Education, Communications, etc. Be it as it may, attempts by scholars at defining code-switching and code-mixing show that code-switching is 'a common term for alternative use of two or more language varieties of a language or even speech styles' (Hymes, 1999).

Code in sociolinguistics simply refers to a language or a language variety (Emeka-Nwobia, 2007). Both code-mixing and code switching are in one way or another coming together of two or more languages or codes (Emeka-Nwobia, 2007). Unlike Pidgins and Creoles, these are milder instances of language contact situation (Emeka-Nwobia, 2007; Dibie & Robert, 2018). Scholars agree that code-switching is the mixing of words, phrases and sentences from two distinct grammatical (sub) systems across sentence boundaries within the same speech event (Decamp, 1971; Holmes, 1989; Holmes, 2001; Aziza, 2003; Bokamba, 2003; Emeka-Nwobia, 2007; Dibie & Robert, 2018). These scholars, among others, also agree that code-mixing is the embedding of various linguistic spheres, such as affixes (bound morphemes), phrases and clauses from a co-operative activity, whereby the participants, in order to infer what is intended, must reconcile what they hear with what they understand.

To add to the above, this study holds that code-mixing is simply the mixing of mostly words, phrases, clauses and/or even complete sentences of two languages or speech varieties. Code- switching is nothing but switching from one language to another to create a special effect. The key difference between code-mixing and code-switching is indeed that code switching has a special, social and pragmatic consequence, while code-mixing does not. This paper places emphasis on code-mixing. Be it as it may, code-mixing is a sociolinguistic reality among teachers and students in Nigerian classroom especially in the rural areas, where there are enormous challenges of teaching and learning as well as implementing the medium of instruction policy.

The Challenges of Teaching English at the Lower Basic Education Class

Again, Nigeria's language policy stipulates the use of the mother-tongue or the language of the immediate environment as the medium of instruction at the lower basic education. Definitely, such stipulation would not be applicable to teaching English as a subject at this level. English language teaching at this level is fraught with too many challenges. The challenges include:

I. Lack of teaching and learning materials in the English language;
II. Teacher quality, capacity and competencies in the use of English with regards to fluency, pedagogical knowledge and knowledge of subject content;
III. Bi/multilingual native language nature of classes;
IV. Disparity in the teacher and student native language; and
V. Lack of teacher support vis-à-vis training and resources.

Faced with these numerous challenges, the ESL teacher at the lower basic education level has to be duly supported with all they need to be able to take up the task well and deliver efficiently. A mediating factor, code-mixing, becomes a bridge and a launch pad towards effective classroom delivery. Thus, that is why this paper places emphasis on code-mixing.

Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded by the Affective Filter Hypothesis, proposed by Krashen (1982). This Hypothesis theorizes what impedes efficient learning or acquisition, caused by negative emotional ('affective') responses to one's environment. It is a second language acquisition theory, which also situates in educational psychology. According to the Affective Filter Hypothesis, certain emotions, such as anxiety, self-doubt and mere boredom interfere with the process of acquiring a second language.

They function as a filter between the speaker and the listener, which reduces the amount of language inputs the listener is able to understand. These negative emotions prevent efficient processing of the language input. The hypothesis also states that the blockage can be reduced by sparking interest, providing low-anxiety environments and bolstering the learner's self-esteem.

According to Krashen (1982), there are two prime issues that prevent the lowering of the affective filter. The first is not allowing for a silent period. That is, expecting the student to speak before they have received an adequate amount of comprehensible input according to their individual needs. This can be extended to the English only class at the lower basic education level in Nigeria, where pupils are expected to speak English only when they are yet to receive adequate language input in English . The second is correcting their errors too early in the learning process. In any aspect of education, it is always important to create a safe and welcoming environment in which students can learn. In language education, this may be especially important since in order to take in and produce language, learners need to feel that they are able to make mistakes and take risks. The judicious use of mother-tongue in the English language lesson would help motivate pupils, and help them possess a positive attitude, boost up their learning confidence and lower their language anxiety.

Using Code-Mixing and Teaching English Subject in Lower Basic Class

It stretches the imagination to consider how teachers, who use the LIE as the medium of instruction, can achieve the feat of teaching English as a subject at the lower basic level in Nigeria without a recourse to the use of MT or LIE. It is impossible to learn anything unless you relate it to what you already know. This means that children will always translate even if we tell them not to. Thus, it is important that we make sure they have the correct translations of whatever they intend or attempt to translate. The old argument about encouraging them to think in English is only really feasible when they have enough language in which to think.

Arguably, using the target language as much as possible should remain the main goal of English Language class teacher at the lower basic level class. Doing so would avert the errors found in the spoken English of pupils and students in Southeastern Nigeria, as reported by Emeka-Nwobia and Onu (2016). Code-mixing MT with English Language at the early level of education would undoubtedly arm pupils for effective use of both English and MT codes in the nearest future without or with very minimal MT interference with the English Language. Therefore, teachers should avoid the redundant use of the mother-tongue and use it only to facilitate their job. Its overuse blocks the acquisition process of the second language like English, as learners would acquire, under and use English language just very little. Every situation is unique, but a general principle might be to try to use English as much as possible – without producing confused, worried or bored learners. Teachers are therefore to use mother-tongue in the English language class in the following situations rather judiciously:

1. Giving Instructions: As Larsen-Freeman (2000) has noted, many failures in tests and activities are due to learner's lack of understanding of instructions. L1 can be used to redress this issue by helping students to understand what is exactly asked of them. Instructions should be given in English, with repetition made in the mother-tongue. Teacher could give an English instruction and get the learners to say it in the mother-tongue to ensure understanding or vice versa.

2. **Explaining Abstract Concepts or Something New**: It is very difficult to teach the meaning of abstract concepts, as it is rather vague. For example, it is very difficult to define or explain what 'hunger' is. It could be somewhat confusing if the teacher tries to demonstrate it. The use of mother-tongue helps the students to get away from misconstruing the concept.

3. Teaching Grammar: L1 can be of great help when teaching grammar. Translation exercises, for example, may be the perfect practice when there is a grammar point that is causing trouble to students. Sometimes, while teaching grammar, the explanations may judiciously be given in student's mother-tongue.

4. Discussing Cross-Cultural Issues: Language is a vehicle for cultural aspects. If teachers ban the use of the mother-tongue, this underlies an ideological conception of L1 culture as being inferior. Alternatively, cultural differences and similarities can be highlighted to help learners accept and tolerate differences while at the same time preserving their cultural uniqueness. This can be done through various activities where L1 plays an important role.

Caution

Of course, there is a need for caution in utilizing the MT in the EFL classroom. Atkinson (1987) acknowledges this by noting the potential for the following undesirable outcomes of overuse of MT viz:

- The teacher and/or the students begin to feel that they have not really understood any item of language until it has been translated.
- The teacher and/or the students fail to observe the distinctions between equivalence of form, semantic equivalence and pragmatic features, and thus oversimplify to the point of using crude and inaccurate translations.
- Students speak to the teacher in the mother-tongue as a matter of course, even when they are quite capable of expressing what they mean.
- Students fail to realize that during many activities in the classroom, it is quite essential that they use only English.

Conclusion

The debate over the use of L1 in foreign language teaching has not been settled yet. While some teachers reject the use of L1 or fail to recognize any significant potential in it, there are those who massively overuse it. Both are abusing a resource of great importance. A rational and judicious use of L1 in EFL classes can only be advantageous. L1 use must be tuned up with effective target language teaching, taking into consideration the learners' mother-tongue and cultural background and using them to the best of their interest. Consequently, code-mixing is an inevitable phenomenon in bilingual communities. It occurs naturally in second- or foreign-language classrooms and it can be used beneficially in many classroom activities. Although it is sometimes seen as a sloppy or presumptive way to speak, it is natural and can be turned to a purposeful and useful activity in language classes. In the final analysis, a systematic use of target language and a minimal use of mother tongue in English language classroom may provide learners with explicit knowledge of the target language systems.

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