

EDUCATION AT THE CROSSROADS: BILINGUALISM IN NIGERIAN ELEMENTARY CLASSROOMS¹

Ayorinde Dada and Olubunmi Ogunyemi

Nigeria is a multilingual country where English is used as the official language. It is the language of public administration, law, government and higher education. Alongside English are a dozen other languages indigenous to Nigeria which are officially recognized as national languages, of which three - Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba - stand out as major languages. They are highly developed and standardized with a lot of literature and cultural backing. All the Nigerian national languages and a few others are used in lower education while the major ones are even studied as subjects up to the university level.

In 1977, a National Policy of Education was drawn up which specified among other things that:

the government will see to it that the medium of instruction in the primary (elementary) school is initially the mother tongue or the language of the immediate community and at a later stage English.
(section 3:15 (4))

The thinking behind this clause is that Nigeria needs to pay attention to and develop her own languages for the purpose of oral and written communication, and such development will also contribute to cultural revival. It is also believed that learning in the mother tongue at the initial stages of education will greatly enhance cognitive development before the child starts to grapple with a second language.

The Problem In practice, most schools use the mother tongue for the first three years of elementary education while English is introduced as a subject; at the fourth grade there is a switchover to English as the medium of instruction and the mother tongue becomes a school subject. Of course there are still many private schools where there is the practice of 'straight-for -English' right from early childhood stages. At the switchover point a lot of communication features, patterns and problems arise which can have

important implications for both language learning and learning in other subject areas. This is the point at which we decided to carry out an observation.

The Present Study This was a pilot study aimed at finding out in concrete terms how the switch-over is being implemented in schools at the initial stage (fourth grade). More specifically it was meant to attempt to provide response to the following questions:

1. In which language(s) does the teacher communicate to the class?
2. Where both English and the mother tongue are involved, what is the proportion of each language used?
3. What pattern of language use emerges?
4. What is the pattern of learners' language use?
5. What particular difficulties arise at this point?
6. What can the educator and/or the sociolinguist learn from this information?

Method of Study Sample: This being a pilot study, only one school was used, but we picked up two classrooms: A and B. The school is situated at Ibadan, the capital town of Oyo State, a Yoruba-speaking area. Both pupils and teachers are Yoruba-speaking.

Classroom A: Here there were 40 pupils in the class. This is the average for most classrooms. There was a female teacher with G.C.E. ordinary level basic qualification plus a Teachers' Grade II professional qualification. In college, students are trained to handle all subjects at the elementary level; there is no subject specialist training at this level (cf. Dada, 1982). The teacher has had six years of post-training experience. The classroom arrangement was teacher-fronted like in most classrooms in Nigeria. Pupils are lively and they interact freely when they are not taught, but experience inhibition especially when they are addressed in English. All their private discussions are in Yoruba. Here we observed two English lessons and one mathematics lesson.

Classroom B: This classroom space was of the same size as Classroom A, but there were two classes combined under the care of two teachers who taught alternate lessons. There were therefore about 90 pupils in the classroom with hardly any space for free

movement between rows. The class was normally noisy, pupils doing all their chattering in Yoruba. Here two subjects were observed: science and health education. Only one teacher taught. She was of comparable qualification and experience with the Class A teacher.

Procedure: Each class was observed by the two researchers. In addition all utterances were duly recorded on cassette tapes. Because we had been to the classes several times earlier, we did not need to be introduced. We were already welcome guests. We did not participate in classroom activities except once when one of us decided to engage one of the pupils in conversation in English.

Results: The recorded verbal interactions were carefully analysed bearing in mind our research questions. A count was made of the utterances in the languages used in the classrooms viz: English, Yoruba and Mixed code (English and Yoruba). The following figures were obtained:

Table 1 - Teachers' Utterances in Various Languages in Subject Area

Class	Subject	English Utterances	Yoruba Utterances	Mixed Code Utterances
4A	English I	11	24	20
4B	English II	27	37	16
4A	Maths	83	100	50
4B	General Science	19	25	12
4B	Health Educ.	125	22	9

Table 2 - Pupils' Utterances in Different Languages

Class	Subject	English	Yoruba	Mixed Code
4A	English I	4	2	0
4A	English II	6	4	1
4A	Maths	29	22	4
4B	General Science	15	11	2
4B	Health Education	18	6	0

Table 1 above shows that generally speaking teachers used more Yoruba language than English. Health Education was an exception; here more English utterances occurred. The topic taught was "overcrowding", an obviously familiar topic judging by the teacher's handling of it. She had a lot of examples to offer and demonstrations to give. Here is an example:

Teacher: Now, this overcrowding is not good in the house. Maybe your father is having only one room. Your father is there, your mother is there, your auntie is there, your senior sister is there, your little brother is there and you are also there - making six of you in the room. That one is not good. Who can tell me why it is not good for a house to be crowded or a room to be crowded with people? We treated that when we were dealing with fainting Yes?

Pupil: The house is hot.

Teacher: The house is very very hot, the room is Eh hen? What will happen?

Pupil: There is no fresh air.

Teacher: No fresh air; your sister will be breathing hmmmmmm! [teacher demonstrates snoring]. Your father will be breathing Hmmmmmm! [with pupils echoing the hmmm and laughing] and you also will be snoring; so breathing altogether, there will be no fresh air, so the room will be very hot.

By far the most communicatively active class was in mathematics where both the teacher and the pupils did the most talking. We found out that the topic, velocity, needed a lot of explanation to make pupils understand, and the teacher had to check constantly to ensure that she was carrying the pupils along. Even here, more Yoruba had to be used in order to ensure comprehension and participation. Here is an example:

Teacher: If somebody is riding a bicycle--firi, firu [demonstrates riding], riding a bicycle and the place he has to cover, maybe he is riding a bicycle from here to Oyo and the mileage from here is how many kilometers?

Pupils: 88 kilometers.

Teacher: If he keeps riding at 12 kilometers an hour and he wants to cover 88 kilometers, but remember within an hour, he cannot go more than...?

Pupils: 12 kilometers.

Teacher: Nkan ti won nso fun wa nibiyi ni wipe enikan ngun keke loo, ka gba wibe lati ibi de Oyo, lo fe gun keke de, iye irin cse ibiyi de Oyo, o je 88 kilometers ti a ba won, iye iwon re ninyen, sugbon keke ti o ngun lo yen, kil se wibe yo fo lati ibiyi, gbi, yio si de ibi ti o nio, gbi. Abi bi o rin ne ken (this is essentially all that has been explained in English except for the last part where the teacher asks whether the cyclist will have to be catapulted to Oyo rather than ride)

Pupils: Rara! [Not at all!]

Teacher: A maa wa keke e lo ni. Abi beeko? [He would just be riding along, wouldn't he?]

Pupils: Beeni. [Yes.]

And the lesson continued for the next ten minutes in Yoruba.

In General Science, the teacher treated 'friction,' and most of her illustrations were given in Yoruba, with English used for simple definitions:

Teacher: Where an object is rubbing against another, that is what?

Pupils: Friction.

Teacher: Again.

Pupils: Friction.

Strangely enough, the English lessons have the highest proportion of Yoruba utterances as well as mixed codes. Possible explanations for this might include the unfamiliarity of the subject matter--life in the desert, having to do with nomads, camel riding, etc. When no response is forthcoming from the pupils, the teacher switches on to Yoruba or mixed code:

Teacher: What is camel used for?.....Ki la nlo Camel fun? [Same question]
Abi ta lo le so Yoruba Kameli fun wa? (Who can give us the Yoruba word for 'camel'?)

Pupil: Rakunmi. [Camel.] A maa nje, won nta loja. [It's eaten, it's sold.]

Teacher: Apart from that, ki la maa nlo rakunmi fun? [What is camel used for?] ... We use it in travelling. Now, let us see some difficult words. What is thunderstorm?... E o mo? (Don't you know?) Thunderstorm ti a se nigbati a nse new words last week. (The thunderstorm that we treated as new word last week.) Kini ni Yoruba? (What is it in Yoruba?)

Pupil: Excuse ma! Ara. [Thunderstorm.]

Teacher: Ara. Ara lo maa nsan ti ojo ba fe ro. (What we have when it wants to rain.)

Another explanation is that Yoruba and mixed code utterances occurred mostly in the affective domain or what Jakobson would call the conative and the phatic: Comments about pupils' behavior, about their performance, greetings, giving instructions, etc.:

Teacher: Auntie, o ya (come on) ask a question. Dide duro sibe, talo ni ki o o joko? (Keep standing. Who asked you to sit down?)

Pupil: What is the meaning of 'deserve'?

Teacher: 'Deserve'--What is the meaning in Yoruba? Talo le so fun wa [Who can tell us?] O ya answer the question. Eh! Olodo. [Blockhead.] Stand up!...E wo Akpan, o kan tile nsun lo saa ni. Akpan, dide duro. [Look at Akpan, he is sound asleep. Akpan, stand up.]

A third explanation is the level of the teacher's competence in English language-- judging by both her faulty grammar and her hesitations; e.g., "Why did the old woman say that Adamu was thief her 50k note? [for....."Adamu stole..."]. She also reverts to her mother tongue whenever she wants to define a word.

A comparison of teacher-talk with pupil-talk shows that virtually all lessons were teacher-dominated, as is usual with most lessons. What Stevick (1976) calls "learner space" was practically invaded by the teacher. Most pupils' responses were in chorus, except where the teacher specifically designated individuals to ask or answer a question. The approximate teacher-pupil ratio of utterances in each subject is as follows:

English I -- 9:1

English II -- 7:1

Math. -- 4:1

Gen. Sci. -- 2:1

Health -- 6:1

The approximate proportion of English use to Yoruba and mixed code is as follows:

	Teacher		Pupils	
	English	Yoruba/Mixed	English	Yoruba/Mixed
English I	1	4	2	1
English II	1	2	1.2	1
Math.	1	2	1.1	1
Gen. Sci.	1	2	1	1
Health	4	1	3	1

It will be observed that the proportion of teachers' input in English is low, perhaps a bit too much so for a class that is expected to receive instruction entirely in English. While pupils generally speak slightly more English than the mother tongue (and this is an aggregate figure), what they say altogether is quantitatively low. They do far more

listening (to Yoruba instruction) than speaking. What we can conclude from this is that by and large, pupils are just at the threshold of communication in terms of vocabulary learning, learning to provide answers to specific questions, etc. Self-expression is still carried out in the mother tongue. It should be added that all their out-of-class activities and interactions are in Yoruba.

There was a time when one of us decided to address a pupil in English on what he was doing during class period (when the teacher was chatting with a colleague).

Pupil: [drawing a football pitch and placing players in it] Wo Felix Owolabi. Wo Wole Odegbami. [Look at Felix Owolabi. Look at Wole Odegbami.]

Researcher: Don't you have time for this on the time-table?

Pupil: Yes.

Researcher: How do you know when you have Art?

Pupil: [No response.]

Researcher: Now, I can't see any time-table. How do you know what you have next?

Pupil: [No response, suddenly laughs.]

Researcher: I don't want you to laugh. I want you to answer the question. How do you know what you have next?

Pupil: [No response. Another pupil tries to translate to him.]

Definitely this pupil did not understand a word of what was said to him in English, and this may partly explain why the teacher had to use so much Yoruba and mixed code.

The pattern of communication discovered so far could roughly be described as follows:

1. All communication among pupils, whether within or outside the classroom, is in the mother tongue.
2. Teacher interacts with pupils in the mother tongue (i.e., when what she says does not involve imparting knowledge).
3. English is introduced to teach the essence of the lesson, but teacher checks pupils' understanding mainly through the mother tongue.

4. Most explanations are given in Yoruba.
5. When pupils' expected response to a question in English is not forthcoming, questions are reframed, or explanations given, in Yoruba.
6. When teacher finds it difficult to define a word or give its meaning, she uses Yoruba.
7. Teacher/teacher interaction is usually carried out in either Yoruba or mixed code.
8. Pupils' responses in English are mostly short answers or one-word responses. No pupil can do a sustained talk in English.
9. Teachers' input in English is not only low, but contains a lot of deviant or incorrect structures which may contribute adversely to the quality of learners' acquisition.

General Comments What can one learn from the situation? Evidently, this is a case of incipient bilingualism with one language predominating due to the low level of competence in the other. One might want to predict that the switch-over will become more complete as learners climb the educational ladder. However, a study of the higher classes carried out earlier (Dada 1986) reveals that this pattern persists among teachers up to the end of elementary school. Thus in practice, the switch-over process cannot be abrupt and immediate. It lingers on even at the junior secondary level.

Secondly, the standard of English is affected by this mixed use of mother tongue and target language and many features of language use in society probably owe their origin to the school situation (or is it the reverse?). One could imagine what would happen to drop-outs at different levels of education (and there are many of them). For some, fossilisation would take place, for others, there would be backsliding. All these would contribute to what Richards calls the 'lects' in society (Richards 1982). In other words, there should be a lot of contribution from this situation to varieties of English in Nigeria. It appears that learners encounter a lot of problems in their educational growth. How much of poor performance in school is attributable to the language problem and how much to other factors? (cf. Dada 1987) Certainly, the straight-for-English private schools

do record much better performance in both the English language and achievement in the content subjects. But here again, most of the pupils are from a higher socio-economic status sector of society. So the question remains: What does language per se contribute to school learning?

Conclusion This paper has been concerned with language use in a bilingual setting within the formal school system as it affects learning in response to the new language policy in Nigeria. Some patterns have been identified from the observational study carried out in two classrooms of the same school. A few features have also been discovered, although definite conclusions cannot be drawn due to the exploratory nature of the study. A lot of light has been shed, however, on what there is to study, the kinds of questions to ask, what information to seek and how to use the information to draw valid conclusions and make recommendations to the policy makers. This is the subject of subsequent studies.

¹ This paper was submitted to WPEL by the authors who are affiliated with the Department of Teacher Education at the University of Ibadan, Ibadan, Nigeria.

References

- Dada, A. (1982) "Attitudes of Non-specialist Teachers of English to some basic concepts in Teaching English as a Second Language. International Journal of Educational Development, Vol. 2 (2), Autumn.
- (1986) "Language Preference Among Primary School Teachers in a Bilingual Setting. In Use of English in Communication: The Nigerian Experience, Unoh, S. O. (ed.). Ibadan, Nigeria: Spectrum Books, Ltd.
- (1987) Mass Failure in Public Examinations. Ibadan, Nigeria: Heinemann.
- Jakobson, R. (1960) "Linguistics and Poetics." In Style and Language, Sebeok, T. A. (ed.). M.I.T. Press.
- Richards, C. (1982) "Rhetorical and Communicative Styles in the New Varieties of English." In New Englishes, Pride, J. B. (ed.). Rowley, Mass.: Newbury Publishers.
- Stevick, E. W. (1976) Memory, Meaning and Methods: Some Psychological Perspectives. Rowley, Mass.: Newbury Publishers.