

Code Switching in Private Pre-Schools Classrooms in Kenya

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Abstract: *Code switching patterns is a common practice in teaching/learning institutions in bilingual and multilingual communities. The switch from one language to another in different context often shows the social and cultural identities of the speakers. The changing society has influenced the current generation in profound ways. The competitive world has challenged the school proprietors to come up with private pre-schools that ride on top of other pre-schools. The excellence of these schools is especially seen in the language of instruction. The English language is sought to be used from the first day the child appears in school. This becomes challenging because not all children understand English language. In Kenya, Kiswahili has always been the language of the catchment area around the school, alongside the mother tongues. Children are expected to learn mainly through use of this language of the catchment area, which is often treated as their mother tongue. However, most private preschools also adopt the use of English language right from day one of learning. Given the children's various backgrounds, code switching becomes inevitable in a learning situation. The teacher must keep changing from one language to the other as when deemed appropriate to ensure effective learning takes place.*

Keywords: Code switching, Language policy, Private Pre School, Classrooms

1. Introduction

As the needs of families become more varied, there arises need for new developments in social, political and academic fields. Some of these developments are the start of private pre-school that will often qualify education through the correct medium of instruction.

Family and school represent the primary environment in which young children grow and develop. The shifts in language attitude and beliefs have led the learner enter in a dark age because the medium of instruction is new to them. The teachers who are equally affected by the scenario are forced to use a medium that is known to the learners and the teacher by so doing they code switch.

1.1 What is Code Switching?

This term refers to the alternation between two or more languages, dialects or language registers in the course of discourse between people who have more than one language in common. In most contexts one of the two languages is dominant, in this context its Kiswahili while the minor language is the embedded language which is either English or their mother tongue. Code switching occurs when bilinguals or multilingual incorporate a word or utterance of another language into his speech (Haugen 1956: 40). Children who have problems with language will be affected academically, socially and even mentally. Wells (1985) suggests that the quality of the child's conversational ability is more important than social class or family background. The purpose of the school environment is to provide an environment where the children shall build the language skills.

2. The Language Policy in Kenya

In the early childhood institutions in Kenya the language of instruction is the language of the catchment area. This language can either be English, Kiswahili and Mother tongue. From class form henceforth the language of instruction is English language. Kiswahili language is taught as subject and it's also taught in Kiswahili. This language policy has not been followed especially in private pre-schools. Where the un-official language policy is emphasized. The parents who take their children also insist on the English language as a language of instruction.

The language of instruction is crucial in the life of a child. It is believed that the amount of learning accomplished in the earlier years of a child's education is key. Beadle (1970) reminds us that, about one half of a person's intellectual development takes place between conception and age four, and about one third of whatever skills children attain by age eighteen develop between birth and age six. Language is a very important aspect during teaching and learning during this period. In Kenya, most preschool children are between the ages of 3 – 6 years, and if the right foundation is given to the learners through the right language of instruction teaching and learning will go through smoothly.

For instance when these learners leave home when they either know Kiswahili and mother tongue and when they come to school, communication becomes impossible because of the new medium of communication and learning; English, which they hardly understand. Therefore code switching rightly comes in to enable them sail from the world of unknown to known.

3. Literature Review

Code switching in young children

Most of the early research on code switching has emphasized adults interaction (Bakamba 1989, Romaine 1989: 111, Zentella 1982, 1997). These studies have showed the importance of bilingualism in natural settings. In some contexts bilingualism is used where the two languages are balanced among the speakers and Code switching varies also according to the situation (Situational). Code switching may also occur within a conversation (metaphorical), where the intended information is conveyed intimately or when the speaker wants to emphasize a message he uses a different code. Research has showed that younger children code switch when they do not know the word in one language. In some cases, children might momentarily be unable to access a word for a concept in the language in use but can access one more easily in the other language and therefore code switching becomes necessary. Jorgensen (1998) found that 7 to 10 years could manipulate their two languages for power wielding purposes. According to Zentella (1997) children code switch when they learn that elements of the other language convey the meaning of the intended idea more accurately. It is through language that children learn about their world and then communicate their understanding to others around them (Howell et al 1990). As children talk they learn to manipulate oral gesture. Their success in school is linked to a child's achievement in reading, which is connected to oral language development which originates from an environment that is linguistically conducive (Heath, 1983). Vygostsky (1978), maintains that what children learn depends on the environment i.e., company they keep, the activities they engage in together, and how they do or talk about these activities. Appel, McIntyre & Juliebo (1996) assert that children who have insufficient language skills often have negative experiences while attempting to use language thereby creating a few of those speaking in the classroom.

4. Functions of Code Switching

The practice of code switching it-self does not indicate deficiency of language knowledge (Reyes, 2004). Rather it seems to serve a communicative function in conversations. Research findings indicate that children alternation between languages is neither random nor the result of linguistic deficit. Their ability to code switching identifies them as members of particular communities and represents a skillful use of language for social of stylistics ends. The following are six functions of code switching as stipulated by Appel & Musyken (1987).

Communication Power

Language not only structures society, but it also mediates social power. Falsold (1984) observes that speakers derive some communicative power in the use of two languages in the same situation. In the private pre schools, when the learners are able to code switch in English and Kiswahili, it is taken to be an indicator of success at that tender age.

Lack of word or Facility

In order to survive in a language medium that is unfamiliar to both the learners and teachers certain strategies have been adopted, some have resorted to code switching between the official medium of instruction and language one. Lack of vocabulary in the target language enables the speaker to pick one from language one. Speakers will use the referential function of code switching to compensate for shortcomings in the matrix language. This will help the speaker to maintain a good flow. In the private pre-schools both the students and the learners will often switch to language one during explanation of concepts in class.

The directive function

This involves the learners directly hence a participant in conversation can be excluded or included by employing the language familiar/unfamiliar to the speaker (1987:119).

Code switching is also used in explanation or expression.

In this context the speaker switch codes in order to enable them express themselves when answering a question or explaining a concept.

Code switching also plays a **phatic function** also known as the **metaphorical function**. This is where the speaker decides to exclude some people from the conversation by using a different code. This function can mainly be used by the teachers of Pre School especially if they want to exclude the learners from the context.

The Poetic function is involved in switched puns, jokes, interjection. The code switching in these contexts happens when the teacher uses a different code when he/she is annoyed or amazed during class.

The other function of code switching is **metalinguistic**. Code switching happens when a speaker comment on a specific feature of a language by using the other language. This is mainly used in class during translation of words from English to Kiswahili.

In conclusion, it be realized that children use the language with which they feel comfortable and have greater competence. Code switching is also used when the speaker does not get a favorable vocabulary in the target language. In private pre schools the teachers who have the greatest degree of bilingual communication competence are the ones who initiate code switching to enable the teaching and learning activities to proceed smoothly on.

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