

Research Article

An Application of Grosjean's (2001) Bilingual's Language Modes on English Language Teaching as Medium of Instruction in Ghanaian Primary Schools

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ABSTRACT

Bialystok (2015) argues that the bilingual's cognitive benefit is related to the continuous supervision and the need for conflict resolution that happens when dual languages are co-activated. One framework that clearly projects the experience of the bilingual, in terms of swapping languages is the bilingual's language modes (BLMs) by Grosjean (2001). In this review paper, we have highlighted the policy of medium of instruction for teaching English in primary schools in Ghana. Again, we have briefly described the tenants of the BLMs, and demonstrated how these modes can be applied on the Ghanaian bilingual primary schools. On the basis of the BLMs, we argue that the most suitable medium of instruction for teaching and learning of English as a second language at the primary level (primary 1 - 6) of a diverse Ghanaian multilingual society should be English language, and the mother tongue of the community within which the school is situated. This argument is in conformism with Anyidoho (2009), and Owusu et al. (2015). Consequently, this paper would enable the key stakeholders of Ghanaian primary schools, to reexamine the policy of instruction for teaching English in Ghanaian primary schools, by placing prominence on the first language of the various speech communities in Ghana.

Introduction

In classical and old-fashioned literature, bilingualism has been looked at from several dimensions. Bloomfield's (1933) definition of bilingualism as cited in Edwards (2006, p.8) states that bilingualism emanates from adding up a flawlessly learned foreign language to one's own, undiminished native tongue. Weinreich (1953) opines that bilingualism is a situation where two languages are alternated at a point in time. However, Grosjean (1989) as cited in Meisel (2006, p.93) insists that "the bilingual is not two monolinguals in one person". Baker and Prys Jones (1998, p. 2) as cited in Wei (2000, p.5) argue that in defining a bilingual person, some of the issues that should be taken into consideration are: fluency in two languages, equal competence in two languages, language proficiency, self-perception and self-categorisation, and degrees of bilingualism. Therefore, to Wei (2000, p.7),

"The word 'bilingual' primarily describes someone with the possession of two languages. It can, however, also be taken to include the many people in the world who have varying degrees of proficiency in and interchangeably use three, four or even more languages."

Accordingly, anyone termed as a bilingual person has some skills or talents about the use of two or more languages. Africans are bilinguals. This is to say that most indigenous Africans have both mother tongues and one or several adopted second (and in some cases third or fourth) languages.

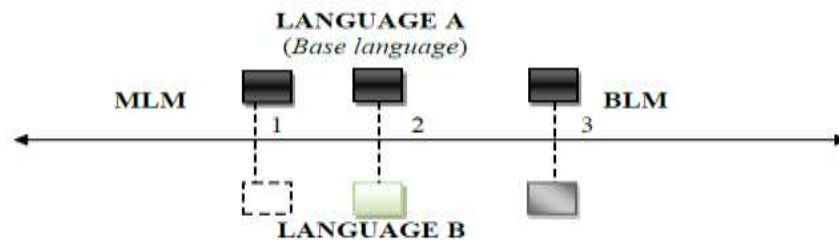
Over the years, there has been a debate about bilingual's linguistic representation – whether or not bilingual children have two linguistic systems. There are quite a number of schools of thought on this matter. The extreme interpretations have proposed two diametrically opposed views – completely shared systems and absolute separation. With these views, no room is left for interaction between the two linguistic systems.

Between these extreme views on bilingual's language representation is Volterra and Taeschner's (1978) Unitary Language System Hypothesis, which happens to be one of the most influential models about bilingual's language representation. The Unitary Language System Hypothesis holds that at the first stage of acquisition, bilingual children start with a single language system, combining words and grammatical rules of both languages. As acquisition advances, these bilingual children reach a second stage where the lexicons of the two languages are differentiated, but not the grammatical rules. At the third and final stage of their linguistic acquisition bilingual children differentiate the grammatical rules of the languages they are acquiring and can be said to have two separated linguistic systems (Volterra & Taeschner, 1978).

Some of the substitutions of the unitary view are Dual Language Systems Hypothesis (Genesee, 1989) and the Separate Development Hypothesis (de Houwer, 1995). These two hypotheses claim that children who acquire two languages from birth develop two separated linguistic systems consistently with each of their input languages (de Houwer, 1995). In the midst of this debate, one concept that most researchers have employed in their write-ups of how bilinguals' language systems interact, is Grosjean's (2001) Bilingual's Language Mode.

The Bilingual's Language Modes

According to Grosjean (2001) the bilingual's language modes 'are the different states of activations of the bilingual's languages and language processing mechanisms at a given point in time.' Grosjean (2001) makes his definition clear by using the figure 1 below:



Key: MLM – Monolingual Language Mode

BLM – Bilingual Language Mode

Figure 1 - Visual representation of the Language Mode Continuum.

Grosjean (2001, p. 430)

From figure 1, the bilingual's languages (A and B) are represented by boxes in the top and bottom part of the figure. The activation level of the bilingual's languages is seen as a continuum ranging from no activation to complete activation. The level of activation of these languages is represented by the degree of darkness of the square. Black squares (as illustrated in language A) stand for a completely or highly active language and the white square stands for deactivated or non-active language. The shades of grey indicate intermediate states of activation (Grosjean 2001, p. 430).

Language A, is the base language. Thus, it is the core or root language. So, at any given point in time, language A, the main language, is always the most active one. But, there are disparities in the degree of activation of language B. Language B is always less activated than the base language is. The points labeled 1, 2, and 3 illustrate three varied points in time. In position 1, language B is only slightly activated and any bilingual who finds himself or herself in this position is said to be at or close to a monolingual language mode. In position 2, language B is somewhat activated and the bilingual person is said to be in an intermediate mode. In position 3, language B is vigorously activated, though still slightly less activated than the main language, language A. At this position, the bilingual person is said to be in a bilingual language mode (Grosjean 2001, p. 430).

Because language A is the main/core/base language (that is, the language that regulates language processing), in all the three positions, it is completely activated.

In terms of production, bilingual speakers and listeners will normally be in a monolingual state when they are conversing with and listening to other monolingual speakers. When they find themselves in this mode, bilingual persons unintentionally deactivate language B so that it is not used at all, and does not consequently lead to communication barriers such as language differences, and prejudices. Bilingual speakers and listeners will find themselves subconsciously in position 2, an intermediate position, when the interlocutor knows the other language, but either is not very proficient in it or does not like the idea of code mixing and language borrowing (Grosjean 2001, p. 431). When this happens, the speaker's and listener's language B will only be moderately set in motion. But, where the interlocutors share the same languages, A and B, they are said to be in position 3. Here, they feel comfortable mixing the languages; and by this both languages are active; however, language A is more active than language B since it is the main language of processing.

Medium of Instruction for Teaching English in Primary Schools in Ghana

Traditionally, Ghana is a bilingual society. The majority, if not all the peoples in the various communities of the country are bilingual speakers. Thus, societies in Ghana have their own diverse local languages, in addition to the official language, English, which is used for official communication purposes. Over the years Ghana, has had several Educational Reforms, as and when governments assume and leave office. Currently, the language policy of education in Ghana indicates that English language be used as the medium of instruction for all subjects from upper primary (4-6) level to the tertiary level. But, at the lower primary level (1-3), Ghanaian languages should be used as the medium of instruction for all subjects with the exception of English language subject, where English language is supposed to be used for teaching and learning.

Though the language policy of education in Ghana indicates that English language should be used as the medium of instruction at all levels with the exception of the lower primary level, most privately owned schools in Ghana do not comply with this directive conscientiously, as English language is overtly used as the medium of instruction from even the crèche level, through the lower and upper primary levels to the tertiary level. So, in the event where the parents of a child from such privately owned school do not have a clear-cut language policy at home, or do not speak their local language(s) at home at all, the child becomes a subtractive bilingual person or even English monolingual person. Again, there is the likelihood of some deprived primary schools in some remote areas in Ghana, using a particular local language as the medium of instruction for all subjects at all levels.

Pedagogical Implications

(An Application of Grosjean's Bilingual's Language Modes)

At the lower primary level of most public or government owned schools, the interlocutors may be in position 2 of Grosjean's language mode when it comes to the teaching and learning of English language, especially where both the pupil and the teacher may speak the same local language. This intermediate position of the interlocutors is normally clearly displayed in teaching vocabulary. Teaching of vocabulary at the lower primary level usually requires drilling of new words. Drilling facilitates pronunciation and accommodation of new words. Sometimes, if the child lacks comprehension of the vocabulary items, pronunciation and accommodation of the vocabulary items are of no use. Comprehension of new English words at this level can be facilitated by code switching. For example, when a bilingual English-Akan teacher is drilling primary pupils of some English words, such as *galbanum* fruit, the teacher could code switch or even borrow the Akan word, *prekese* 'galbanum' so that the pupil can easily comprehend the word. Thus, the facilitator's use of codeswitching may lead to the attainment of semantic and pragmatic meanings of the target language (Owusu & Afram, 2019, p. 368). This is an instance of application of position 2 of Grosjean's Language Mode. According to Grosjean (2001, p. 432) some of the factors that account for interlocutors using the position 2 of the language mode continuum are lack of a certain level of proficiency of one language on the part of one of the interlocutors (mostly the pupil), and compulsion of treatment of topics in the base language. But, the other language is needed from time to time (Grosjean, 2001, p. 432).

Still at the lower primary level, there are some privately owned schools who strictly comply with the policy on using English to teach English to the point that all teaching and learning are done in English. When this happens, the teacher and the pupils occupy position 1 of the language mode continuum, and they are said to be in a monolingual state. Consequently, they deactivate their mother tongue and activate the English language, which now becomes language A (base language). Among some of the factors that could account for this situation on the part of both interlocutors are superior language proficiency, negative attitude toward language mixing, social-economic status, presence of monolingual English speakers, and degree of formality (Grosjean, 2001, p. 432). For such a class, even if the pupils do not understand an English vocabulary like *galbanum*,

the teacher would refrain from code switching since that might even worsen the plight of the learner. In such a situation, pictures or simulation exercises may be used in explaining such a key word.

At the upper primary level where the policy mandates that English language be used as the medium of instruction for the teaching and learning of all subjects (including English language as a subject), most teachers and pupils of some public schools are still likely to assume position 3 (bilingual mode). This is possible, especially where both interlocutors are very fluent in language A (the local language) and have also gained a certain level of proficiency in language B; but the level of proficiency gained in language B, English language, is not adequate for total comprehension of all English topics taught in English language only. Here, one of the languages (mostly language A) would still be more active than the other (language B). Some of the factors that could lead to this situation are the necessity to code switch or borrow from the core language (language A), and limited input of language B. An instance of limited input is where a child speaks only English at school, and does not speak it at all at home with his or her family and peers.

Additionally, upper primary pupils from some privately owned schools are most likely to be at position 1 (monolingual language mode) of the language mode continuum when it comes to the teaching and learning of English language at upper primary level. Since most of these students come from a background (for example, monolingual English home) which may expose them to English language at a tender age, activities such as reading of English texts, listening to spoken English materials, writing basic English structures, and speaking basic English structures might not be a novelty. The class teacher, on realizing this linguistic state of such a child or children may unconsciously deactivate his or her local language mode so that only English language is used in teaching the subject English. This leads to the highest level of conformity of the language policy of Ghana in the area of the medium of instruction for teaching English in primary schools. Therefore, under such circumstances, activities such as code switching and language borrowing are very minimal if not completely absent.

Conclusion

This work has explored Grosjean's Bilingual's Language Modes which highlights the manner of activation of the bilingual's languages and language processing techniques that bilinguals exhibit at a given point in time (Grosjean, 2001, p. 430). The pictorial representations of these modes and mechanisms have been projected in figure 1. Again, the paper has looked at the policy of English language as a medium of instruction in Ghanaian primary schools. Based on Grosjean's Language modes and English language policy in a multilingual environment like Ghana, the paper has offered some pedagogical implications and recommendations.

Linguistically, Ghana is a heterogeneous community. According to Owusu-Ansah (2009), Ghana has over 100 linguistic and ethnic groups. Over the years, these identified groups have maintained a sense of ethnic identity, including language. So, in any of these groups, a policy preventing their posterity from exhibiting their (the posterity's) ethnic/cultural identity will amount to a depravity of language identity. On this basis, we recommend that the current policy of English as medium of instruction in Ghanaian primary schools should be revised. Consequently, we propose that a policy that is skewed towards either position 1 or 2 of Grosjean's (2001) language mode continuum should be strongly indorsed for primary school education in Ghana. Such a policy which would obviously endorse some language phenomena such as code switching and borrowing would ensure that the local language right of the primary pupil in Ghana is not infringed upon.

Our paper, just like any other research works, has some limitations. In the paper, the bilingual's language modes have been applied on the teaching of English language at the primary school level only. Consequently, future research can apply the bilingual's language modes on the teaching and learning of English at the secondary and tertiary levels in the multilingual speech communities of Ghana. Again, future studies could focus on empirical reviews on the bilingual's language modes, and also collect primary data to establish the validity or otherwise of the pertinent issues advanced in the empirical reviews. The following recommendations have been given:

Recommendations

In Owusu *et al.* (2015), it came to light that bilingual-English-mother tongue participants outperformed their counterparts – monolingual-mother tongue and monolingual-English speakers at home – on academic writing test. That is while bilingual English-mother tongue participants had grand total marks of 121 of the academic writing test, those in the monolingual-English category placed second with 103 marks and the last-placed participants were those in the monolingual-mother tongue category who had grand total marks of 97 (Owusu *et al.*, 2015). Though, this study was done at the tertiary level, the signal is clear – bilingual persons perform better than their monolingual colleagues do.

In another study conducted by Edwards (2006, p. 16) it was concluded that the bilingual child possesses a superiority in concept formation, and a more diversified set of mental abilities” (Edwards 2006, p. 16). Wei (2000, p. 23) has also pointed out that ‘...being able to move between two languages may lead to more sensitivity in communication. Because bilinguals are constantly monitoring which language to use in different situations, they may be more attuned to the communicative needs of those with whom they talk.’

Furthermore, a BBC News item reported (on Wednesday, June 4, 2014) indicates that: “learning a second language can have a positive effect on the brain.” This finding came about after a Scottish study saw that respondents who spoke two or more languages performed better in intelligence tests than people who only spoke English. So, encouraging the use of different languages in a multilingual classroom setting could ‘slow brain ageing’ of the learners.

On the basis of these studies, we argue that the bilingual children would outperform their monolingual contemporaries in language related tests, *ceteris paribus*. In the light of these revelations, we recommend that the most appropriate medium of instruction for teaching and learning of English as a second language at the primary level of a heterogeneous multilingual society such as Ghana should be English language and the mother tongue of that community, within which the school is located. Thus, from lower primary up to primary 6, the pupil’s first language should be seen as playing an active role in his or her bid to acquire a second language. This is in consonance with Anyidoho’s (2009) assertion that children can see the school as an extension of the home rather than as a totally different place if the use of the first language is encouraged in our primary schools. The use of the language 1, according to her, may reduce the emotional and psychological disturbance that many children experience when they enroll in school. Thus, the child’s local language should be made to play a complementary or supporting role in the child’s quest to acquire a second language. Moreover, Anyidoho (2009) argues that the high level of competence in the L1 that children bring to school is important if they are required to express their feelings and views. The English-only medium can slow down pupils’ self-expression for as long as it takes for them to become proficient in it.

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