

# **REASONS FOR CODE SWITCHING IN UPPER PRIMARY CLASSES IN THE KHOMAS EDUCATIONAL REGION**

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## **Abstract**

*In this article, the views of upper primary school teachers in the Khomas educational region regarding code switching were investigated. A questionnaire and interviews were administered to a stratified sample of 13 schools with 44 participants that were aware of the occurrences of code switching within their classes. It was found that the main reasons for code switching were due to its usefulness in the teaching environment, such as transmitting of knowledge, clarifying concepts or meanings, and assisting learners who had a deficiency in the competence of the English language. Code switching was furthermore used in the classrooms when discipline problems arose and when learners were not paying attention.*

## **Introduction**

Namibia is one of the richest countries in Africa in terms of its multilingual structure with the following languages spoken: Oshikwanyama, Oshindonga, Oshihherero, Rigciriku, Rukwangali, Thimbukushu, Khoekoegowab, Afrikaans, German, English, Lozi, Setswana, and Portuguese (Cluwer, 1990 and Ministry of Education and Culture, 2003). The Namibian government found that the formulation of a language policy was a difficult task that needed to take all languages into account when deciding on an official language, which should be the medium of instruction in schools (MEC, 1993).

The Ministry of Education regarded all languages as equal in the country and the language policy had to regard language as a medium of cultural transmission.

Although the language policy in Namibian schools is English as medium of instruction in Grades 5 to 12, and a home language as medium of instruction in Grades 1 to 4, the majority of teachers and learners use English as a second or third language. A study conducted by Erkana (1992) on the situation in and outside the classroom with regard to national languages, in various regions within the country, found that teachers and learners used their mother tongue in and outside the classrooms. In the Khomas education region, the languages mostly used were Afrikaans, English or German. Languages used in the other regions were Afrikaans, English, Khoekhoegowab, Oshikwanyama, Oshindonga, Otjiherero, Setswana and others. English was used on rare occasions, where the school was an English-medium school.

The study conducted by Erkana on the language situation in and outside the classroom revealed that the language through which teachers obtained their qualifications also played a role in the usage of another language other than English, in teaching and learning in the classrooms. The majority of these teachers received their qualifications through the medium of Afrikaans, with the exception of English in the Ondangwa, Rundu and Katima Mulilo regions (Erkana, 1992).

The language competence of teachers was also identified as another factor that adversely affected teaching. It was found that both teachers' awareness of their own difficulties with the medium of instruction and their knowledge of problems which learners experience accounted for the use of language switching within the classrooms. Teachers described their competence in English as "less than good", and they also commented that they teach English through the medium of another language (MEC, 1992 and Wolfaardt, 2001).

It is evident from the above discussion that although English

is the official language in Namibian schools in Grades 5 to 12, many teachers and learners still communicate in their mother tongue. The purpose of this study was to find out why teachers and learners use their mother tongue instead of English, during the teaching and learning process.

## **Methodology**

### ***Research Design***

A mixed method combining both quantitative and qualitative methodologies was chosen to gather the necessary data. The concept of triangulation is sometimes used to designate a conscious combination of quantitative and qualitative methodology (Hammersley, 1992). The triangulation method of data collection was used to find a representative sample during the research design; to help during data collection by supplying background data, getting overlooked information and avoid being bias; to assist during analysis by showing the applicability of the interviews; and to cast light on qualitative findings.

### ***Population***

The population of this study consisted of teachers in grade five (5), six (6), and seven (7) from schools in the Khomas Educational Region. The Khomas Educational Region has 52 schools that provide teaching in the upper primary phase (ME, 2003). The total numbers of class groups in grade five (62), six (61), and seven (62), and the total number of teachers are 185 altogether (MEC, 2003).

### ***The Sample***

The stratified random sampling technique was applied in the study. Here the population was divided into homogeneous groups. A list of schools in the Khomas Educational Region was obtained from the Ministry of Education of which 25% of the schools were randomly selected for this study. The study included the upper primary teachers. In each grade, 25% of the teachers were randomly selected to participate in the study.

## ***Instruments***

The research instruments that were used consisted of questionnaires and interviews. The questions that were used in the questionnaire were structured, semi-structured and scaled questions. The interviews were structured in an open-ended way so that teachers could respond in their own words and use whatever words they wanted to express what they want to say.

## ***Procedure***

The questionnaire was administered to the 25% of the respondents at 12 schools. At the 13<sup>th</sup> school, only 17% of the respondents answered the questionnaire because not all the respondents were made available by the principal of the school. The interviews were conducted with all the respondents at the schools. Respondents were asked to be honest in their responses and were assured that the information would be treated as confidential. Letters were sent to the Ministry of Education requesting permission to conduct the research in schools.

## ***Data Analysis***

The questionnaire was presented in numerical data and facilitated the making of comparisons between frequencies, patterns and trends to be noted and collected as explained by Cohen et al. (2003). The statistic that was used to analyze the data from the questionnaire was the Chi-Square. It was used to determine whether there were significant relationships and/or differences among the variables. Descriptive statistics such as frequencies and percentages were used to record the data. Codes and categories for each of the questions asked in the interviews were organized. A comparative method was used in the analysis of the data where patterns were looked for that were of importance. A single interview was transcribed to find units of meaning. Labelling the units of meaning, grouping of codes, making a list of all codes followed this and then the main categories were brought together into one whole. Interpreting the data followed.

## ***Results***

There were 14 statements in the questionnaire in the section on the reasons

for code switching. Respondents were asked to indicate to what extent they agreed or disagreed with the reasons given that might account for why teachers switch from one code to another while teaching. The results are summarized in Table1.

**Table 1: REASONS FOR THE USE OF CODE SWITCHING**

Reasons	Strongly Agree		Agree		Disagree		Strongly Disagree		No Response		Total
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	
1. Teachers, to whom English is a second language, switch because they feel comfortable with their mother tongue.	5	11.0	14	32.0	15	34.0	10	23.0	0	0.0	45
2. Teachers use code switching as a communication strategy with learners to whom English is a foreign language to assist in transmitting knowledge.	11	25.0	25	57.0	4	9.0	3	7.0	1	2.0	45
3. A teacher may not be able to express him/herself in one language thus switches to the other language.	3	7.0	14	32.0	15	34.0	11	25.0	1	2.0	45
4. A teacher may switch from one language to another if he/she wishes to exclude another learner from a conversation.	2	5.0	2	5.0	9	20.0	30	68.0	1	2.0	45
5. A teacher may switch languages to convey his/her attitude to the learners.	4	9.0	14	32.0	9	20.0	15	34.0	2	5.0	45
6. The teachers turn to a learner's first language to signal friendship and solidarity and to establish rapport with the learners.	4	9.0	15	34.0	10	23.0	14	32.0	1	2.0	45
7. Teachers repeat the same message in both English and mother tongue to clarify concepts or meaning.	13	30.0	23	52.0	4	9.0	4	9.0	0	0.0	45
8. Teachers use code switching because they experience difficulty in relating new concepts to learners in the official medium of instruction.	5	11.0	14	32.0	18	41.0	6	14.0	1	2.0	45
9. Teacher uses another language other than English when he/she is tired, upset or distracted in some way.	3	7.0	10	23.0	11	25.0	19	43.0	1	2.0	45

10. Teacher uses code switching when he/she wishes to praise or tell learners off.	0	0.0	10	23.0	18	41.0	15	34.0	1	2.0	45
11. Teacher uses code switching when it is found that learners are not paying attention during teaching in the classroom.	0	0.0	19	43.0	10	23.0	14	32.0	1	2.0	45
12. Teacher uses code switching to make learners pay attention to new knowledge.	0	0.0	16	36.0	16	36.0	11	25.0	1	2.0	45
13. Teacher uses code switching during revisions in the classroom.	0	0.0	7	16.0	21	48.0	15	34.0	1	2.0	45
14. Teacher allows learners to code switch when he/she discovers that they have a deficiency in linguistic competence of the English language.	7	16.0	17	39.0	12	27.0	7	16.0	1	2.0	45

Most of the respondents were in agreement that teachers use code switching as a communication strategy with learners to whom English is a foreign language to assist in transmitting knowledge (82,0%);

- teachers repeat the same message in both English and mother tongue to clarify concepts or meaning (82,0%);
- teacher allows learners to code switch when he/she discovers that they have a deficiency in linguistic competence of the English language (55,0%) and;
- the teachers turn to a learner's first language to signal friendship and solidarity and to establish rapport with the learners (43,0%).

Most respondents however disagreed that teacher uses code switching when it is found that learners are not paying attention during teaching in the classroom (55,0%);

- teacher uses code switching to make learners pay attention to new knowledge (61,0%);
- a teacher may switch from one language to another if he/she wishes to exclude another learner from a conversation (88,0%);
- teacher uses code switching during revisions in the classroom (82,0%);
- teacher uses another language other than English when he/she is tired, upset or distracted in some way (68,0%);
- teachers use code switching because they experience difficulty in

relating new concepts to learners in the official medium of instruction (55,0%);

- teacher uses code switching when he/she wishes to praise or tell learners off (75,0%);
- teachers, to whom English is a second language, switch because they feel comfortable with their mother tongue (57,0%);
- a teacher may not be able to express him/herself in one language thus switches to the other language (59,0%) and;
- a teacher may switch languages to convey his/her attitude to the learners (54,0%).

### **The relationship between the biographic variables and views of teachers regarding reasons for code switching:**

When data pertaining to the reasons for code switching were analyzed according to school, gender, age, mother tongue, qualification, teaching experience, post description, average number of learners and subjects, it was found that the variables of gender, age, qualification, post description, average number of learners and subjects did not significantly influenced the views of teachers regarding code switching. Data presented in table 2-4 revealed that the variables of school, teaching experience and mother tongue significantly influenced the views of teachers regarding code switching.

**School:** Data analyzed according to schools revealed that more teachers in Katutura schools (44.0%) strongly disagreed or disagreed that a teacher who may not be able to express him/herself in one language switches to the other language compared to teachers in Khomasdal and Windhoek schools. The difference was found to be statistically significant (see table 2).

**Table 2: WHETHER SCHOOLS HAD AN INFLUENCE ON THE REASONS WHY TEACHERS SWITCHED TO OTHER LANGUAGES BY SCHOOLS**

Schools	Response										
	Strongly Agree		Agree		Disagree		Strongly Disagree		No Response		
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	
Windhoek	1	2.0	5	11.0	0	0.0	1	2.0	1	2.0	
Katutura	2	5.0	5	11.0	9	21.0	10	23.0	0	0.0	
Khomasdal	0	0.0	4	9.0	6	14.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	
<b>Total</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>7.0</b>	<b>14</b>	<b>31.0</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>35.0</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>25.0</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2.0</b>	<b>44</b>

**Note:** Chi Square = 19.045; df = 8; p < 0.5

### Teaching Experience:

Table 3 showed that more teachers with teaching experience of 36-40 years (41.0%) strongly disagreed or disagreed with the statement that a teacher, who may not be able to express him/herself in one language switches to the other language than teachers with 41-45 years (11.0%), 31-35 years (5.0%) and more than 50 years (2.0%). The difference was found to be statistically significant.

Table 3: WHETHER A TEACHER, WHO MAY NOT BE ABLE TO EXPRESS HIM/HERSELF IN ONE LANGUAGE, THUS SWITCHES TO THE OTHER LANGUAGE BY TEACHING EXPERIENCE

Teaching Experience	Response										
	Strongly Agree		Agree		Disagree		Strongly Disagree		No Response		
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	
<b>Less than 20</b>	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	
<b>20-25</b>	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	
<b>26-30</b>	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	
<b>31-35</b>	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	2	5.0	0	0.0	
<b>36-40</b>	2	5.0	13	30.0	11	25.0	7	16.0	0	0.0	
<b>41-45</b>	1	2.0	1	2.0	4	9.0	1	2.0	0	0.0	
<b>46-50</b>	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	
<b>More than 50</b>	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	1	2.0	1	2.0	
<b>Total</b>	3	7.0	14	32.0	15	34.0	11	25.0	1	2.0	

Note: Chi Square = 32;388 df = 12; p < 0.5

Note: Total frequencies in this table are less than 45, because of a missing value.

### Mother Tongue:

According to Table 4, more Afrikaans speaking teachers (15.5%) compared to Herero speaking teachers (7.0%), Khoekhoegowab (5.0%), Oshikwanyama (4.0%) Other languages (5.0%) and English (2.0%) strongly agreed or agreed with the statement that a teacher may not be able to express him/herself in one language switches to the other language. The difference was found to be statistically significant.

Table 4: WHETHER A TEACHER WHO MAY NOT BE ABLE TO EXPRESS HIM/HERSELF IN ONE LANGUAGE, THUS SWITCHES TO THE OTHER LANGUAGE BY MOTHER TONGUE

Mother Tongue	Response										
	Strongly Agree		Agree		Disagree		Strongly Disagree		No Response		
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	
English	1	2.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	
Afrikaans	1	2.0	6	13.5	6	13.5	0	0.0	0	0.0	
Khoekoe-gowab	0	0.0	2	5.0	1	2.0	4	9.0	0	0.0	
Herero	0	0.0	3	7.0	2	5.0	1	2.0	0	0.0	
Oshindonga	0	0.0	0	0.0	2	5.0	2	5.0	0	0.0	
Oshikwanyama	1	2.0	1	2.0	4	9.0	1	2.0	0	0.0	
Other	0	0.0	2	5.0	0	0.0	3	7.0	1	2.0	
<b>Total</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>6.0</b>	<b>14</b>	<b>32.5</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>34.5</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>25.0</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2.0</b>	<b>44</b>

Note: Chi Square = 39.498; df = 24; p < 0.5

Note: Total frequencies in this table are less than 45, because of a missing value.

In the findings of the open-ended interview questions regarding the reasons for the use of code switching in classes, the main categories identified were *the inability of learners to understand basic concepts, ideas and terms; and to discipline learners and for socializing.*

Respondents further stated that code switching occurred when learners showed

- a. **Lack of attention.**
- b. **Lack of confidence.**
- c. **Lack of communication.**

In the open-ended question with regard to the reasons why respondents' code switched

The responses given revealed the following categories: *the learners' lack of understanding; to discipline and for socializing; interaction with learners; influence from the community; praising learners; and for enquiry.*

### **Learners' lack of understanding**

Three respondents shared the following opinions:

*"I code switch when learners do not understand instructions given in mathematics."*

*"Learners understand the switch to their second language because it is spoken at school."*

*"Code switching occurs when learners do not understand especially in the 1<sup>st</sup> trimester because learners come from various areas."*

### **To discipline learners and for socializing.**

Some respondents felt that it became necessary to switch to a learners' mother tongue when discipline problems arose in the classroom because learners became relaxed and that switching to a learner's mother tongue was necessary to interact with learners during interval. One respondent indicated the following:

### **Interaction with learners.**

One respondent shared the following opinion:

*"I code switch to interact with individual learners both in and outside the class."*

### **Influence from community.**

One respondent had the following opinion:

*"There is an influence in the area and community. English is only spoken at school."*

### **Praising learners**

*"I code switch to praise individual learners or to comfort them."*

### **For enquiry**

*"When I want to enquire about something not to do with the lesson."*

The additional comments/opinions given regarding the reasons for code switching were;

*discipline; inspiring learners; relating content; bridging the language barrier; lack of teachers English proficiency; learners lack of confidence; and the promotion of both English and mother tongue.*

## **Discussion**

The findings of this study have provided some evidence that although the reasons for the use of code switching in the classroom had useful teaching functions: transmitting of knowledge, clarifying concepts or meaning, and assisting learners who have a deficiency in the competence of the English language, it also seemed not to be used.

However the research also revealed, that teachers do not switch for the reasons given because they consider themselves to be competent in English and that learners understand the work they explain to them. Where code switching occurred, it might be used as a socio-linguistic tool by bilingual speakers when they share the same language and have normal conversation and when they feel comfortable using their mother tongue but not when speakers want to exclude another person from the conversation.

When the mother tongue was analysed it was evident that more Afrikaans speaking teachers strongly agreed or agreed with the statement that a teacher, who may not be able to express him/herself in one language thus switches to the other language, in relation to the other languages namely: English, Khoekhoegowab, Herero, Oshindonga, Oshikwanyama and other languages. This finding might suggest that Afrikaans teachers may at times find it difficult to express themselves in English thus switch to Afrikaans during instructions in classes and that Afrikaans was mostly spoken and understood by most of the learners in the classes.

During the interview, the majority of the respondents revealed that the lack of understanding by learners in the classroom required them to code switch while some indicated that the switch in language was done by learners in the classroom. Another reason given as to why respondents used code switching in their classes was the discipline problem experienced.

Respondents indicated that in order to discipline a learner, they spoke in the learner's mother tongue. This made the learner appear calm and relaxed. The interviewees also indicated that they switched languages when interacting with learners both inside and outside the class and when they praised learners.

It was interesting to note that a response from one of the interviewees mentioned the influence from the community has on the learners where no English

was spoken. The background of the learners also plays a big role in the use of the mother tongue in explaining concepts and making instruction understood by learners. It was also mentioned that in order for a teacher to get a message through to the learners, was to switch languages to facilitate understanding of the lesson.

## **Recommendations**

The recommendations that follow emanate from the results reported earlier and their discussions.

- There is an urgent need for the Ministry of Education to formulate a workable policy that is based on providing guidelines for the use of code switching within the classroom. Code switching from English to other languages should be discouraged in order to foster good English proficiency.
- It is recommended that funds be made available to upgrade the teachers' language abilities through in-service training.
- More financial resources are needed to build more schools in order to reduce the class sizes, upgrade the library facilities in schools or to provide schools with more reading materials.
- Parents and the community at large need to become more involved in the education of their learners.
- Another suggestion is that the Ministry of Education should provide workshops that would make teachers understand the influences their switching in languages has on the learners.
- The results also gave rise to the need for further research and an effort to strengthen English as a language of instruction.
- Since this study was only conducted in one educational region and these findings cannot easily be generalized to other educational regions in the country, it is therefore recommended that similar studies be conducted in other educational regions in Namibia.
- The research findings have shown that learners in the Khomas Educational Region had difficulties in understanding terminology and concepts in the subjects taught through the medium of English. It is therefore recommended that a study be conducted carried out in the Khomas Educational Region to assess the learners' level of competence in the English language.

## **CONCLUSION**

In the ideal classroom situation during teaching and learning, it would be pleasing to use English only which is the medium of instruction in the Upper Primary classes in Namibian schools. However, some difficulties experienced by teachers in their classes makes this very unlikely to happen.

Teachers in the Khomas Educational Region were aware of the occurrences of code switching within classes and that it was widespread, not only in certain schools. The main reasons identified for the use of code switching in classes was found to be due to the lack of understanding of basic concepts, ideas and terms by learners; discipline; socializing; learners' lack of understanding; lack of attention; lack of confidence and lack of communication.

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