Language Use in the Multilingual Classroom Settings of West Africa: A Review of Selected Literature

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Abstract

Linguistically, most Africans are multilingual entities. Extremely, the seventeen (17) West African states display this feature. Thus, in a typical L2 classroom in Africa, the learner is likely to come into contact with several languages. These languages are mostly the official languages(s), the second or third language(s), the international language, and the indigenous languages spoken by both the learners and the teachers. Sometimes, the official language(s) is/are selected indigenous languages (for example, Igbo, Yoruba, and Hausa, in the case of Nigeria). In some cases, the second language is the international language used for official engagements and international discourse. In Western Africa, Ghana is one such country that uses English as both the official and international language. When learners from diverse sociocultural backgrounds are exposed to several languages in a particular classroom setting, a lot of processes emerge. One of such processes is nativisation or indigenisation or localisation of the formal classroom language. This is the process where language learners use the formal classroom language in a manner that suits their communicative needs. This paper is a review of selected empirical studies on the use of language in the multilingual classrooms of selected African countries. The cases and papers were purposively sampled from five West African states of Cameroon, Ghana, Guinea-Bissau, Niger, and Nigeria. This paper argues that language contact processes such as localisation, pidginization, and creolization are not aberrant forms per se; and since they serve the informal linguistic needs of multilingual second language learners, they should be given a place in language use.

Keywords: multilingualism, bilingualism, indigenous language, West African languages, language use

1. Introduction

Language is a specific intricate skill, which increases in the child naturally, without cognisant attempt or formal teaching. It is organised without attentiveness of its fundamental logic, is qualitatively the same in every human being, and is distinct from more general abilities to process information or behave intelligently (Pinker, 1994, p.18). Brown (2000, p. 5) defines language as '... a system of arbitrary conventionalized vocal, written, or gestural symbols that enable members of a given community to communicate intelligibly with one another.' Looking at these two definitions, one realises that language is a methodical process that involves a set of illogical representations, which could be oral, written, or non-verbal, and it is used for sharing ideas, concepts, feelings, facts, and needs. Most speech communities in West Africa are either bilingual or multilingual communities.

Bilingualism is the capacity to possess or speak two languages, and multilingualism is the ability to use several languages. Nonetheless, Wei (2000, p. 7) argues that bilingualism can be used for people worldwide who have varying levels of language dexterity in three or more languages. In contrast to this, a classical definition, by Weinreich (1953) maintains that bilingualism is the 'alternate use of two languages.' Therefore, Baker and Prys Jones (1998, p. 2) as cited in Wei (2000, p. 5) propose that in defining bilingualism, some of the issues or questions that should be considered are: fluency in two languages, equal competence in two languages, language proficiency, self-perception and self-categorisation, and degrees of bilingualism. Some of the countries in West Africa have one

dominant national language. For instance, Senegal uses Wolof, Niger uses Hausa, Mali has Bambara, and Burkina Faso uses Mouré (Hovens, 2002). Despite this situation, West African states are mostly multilingual. For example, in Niger, apart from French (the official language), and Hausa (the dominant national language), twenty (20) other languages are formally recognised (Hovens, 2002). In Guinea-Bissau, about twenty (20) national languages are known. In Nigeria, over 400 languages are spoken (Hovens, 2002). In Ghana, over 79 languages are spoken; and these languages have many regional dialects which are classified into 6 main groups: Kwa, Gur, Mande, Kulango, Senufo, and Gbe (Hovens, 2002; Dakubu, 2015). In Cameroon, about 230 languages are spoken in addition to the two official languages of English and French. The 230 indigenous languages of Cameroon include fifty-five (55) Afro-Asiatic languages, 2 Nilo-Saharan languages, and 173 Niger-Congo languages (Hovens, 2002). In Togo, more than 44 different languages and dialects are spoken, in addition to the official language of French (Hovens, 2002).

Therefore, it is envisaged that the classrooms of West African states would be highly characterised by the use of different unofficial languages, in addition to the official language(s) spoken. The obvious question is: What effect has this got on the education of the L2 learner? Certainly, the effect could be positive or negative. Generally, West Africa is, perhaps, the only section of the former British Empire where English, French, and the other second languages have not tremendously succumbed to the lifelong pressures of the supremacy of other indigenous languages (Simo-Bobda & Supérieure, 1997, p. 96). Although most of the countries in the sub-region (for example: Nigeria, Sierra Leone, and Ghana) have notable literacy programmes in African languages, the official languages have maintained their status as bureaucrat languages. Therefore, the official languages of Nigeria, Sierra Leone, and Ghana have maintained their position as energetic contributors to the formal education of the indigenes of these countries. Consequently, the linguistic situation and the use of language in the multilingual classroom setting of the selected West African states, as portrayed by some authors, are reviewed as follows:

2. The Case of Cameroon

Cameroon has a very rich linguistic situation. According to Simo-Bobda & Supérieure (1997, p. 95), in addition to the numerous local languages spoken, the country can boast of two official languages: English and French. In addition, Pidgin English, which is the English-based lingua franca; and a couple of lingua francas based on the indigenous languages are spoken by sections of the population. In view of this, Simo-Bobda & Supérieure (1997, p. 95) conclude that Cameroon epitomizes the context of English in a multilingual society.

Mbassi-Manga (1973) as cited in Simo-Bobda & Supérieure (1997, p. 95), indicates that Cameroon had its first contact with the English language in the 15th century when the emergence of British privateers in Portuguese boats was reported. Later on, the French, the Dutch, the Swedes, the Poles, and other European colonies succeeded in entering Cameroon. Since then, English and French have remained the two official languages of Cameroon. Simo-Bobda & Supérieure (1997, p. 95) point out that the use of English and French as the only official languages of the country is due to some factors: (1) there are several native languages; therefore, it makes sense to select some languages as the formal languages; (2) indigenous languages were blocked by the legacy of French colonization's civilizing mission; (3) indigenous languages lacked strong influence both nationwide and worldwide; (4) it was going to be expensive promoting indigenous language programmes; and (5) the French-English policy was strictly adhered to.

Nonetheless, the French-English bilingual status added to the earlier complicated linguistic landscape of Cameroon (Simo-Bobda & Supérieure 1997, p. 96). Accordingly, amid this language complexity, 'Pidgin English has been so widespread in Cameroon to the extent that its relationship with Standard English cannot be forced into that of diglossia, with Standard English being considered the High form and Pidgin the Low form' (Simo-Bobda & Supérieure 1997, p. 97). Pidgin is now active in numerous fields, where Standard English was considered High (Chumbow & Simo-Bobda, p. 1995). For example, university students in Cameroon even use Pidgin in discussing Literature and English grammar (Simo-Bobda & Supérieure, 1997, p. 97). Therefore, two of the linguistic consequences of the contact between English and other languages in Cameroon are Englishization and Indigenization (nativization) (Simo-Bobda & Supérieure 1997, p. 100).

In borrowing, English tends to be the beneficiary rather than the benefactor. This is due to the minority status of English in Cameroon (Simo-Bobda & Supérieure 1997, p. 100). Thus, more local languages have been 'Englished.' Njoya (1988) as cited in Simo-Bobda & Supérieure (1997, p. 100) mentions examples of this occurrence in Shu Pamum, a language of the Francophone West Province as:

Shu Pamum   **English origin**

[kúkì]   cook

[páʃítò]	pastor
[faláwà]	flower
[waʃupítà]	hospital

(Njoye, 1998).

Kachin (1990) also shows examples from Medumba, another language of the West Province as:

Medumba	**English origin**
[biá]	beer
[básíkú]	bicycle
[botelɛ]	bottle
[feléwà]	flower/flour

(Kachin, 1990).

Essomba-Fouda (1991), additionally, cites examples in Ewondo as follows:

Ewondo	**English origin**
[bùládà]	brother
[lɛnkot]	raincoat
[bísop]	bishop
[bùlúm]	blue

(Essomba-Fouda, 1991).

At the lexical level, borrowing from indigenous languages in Cameroon is used to label local foodstuffs, social and cultural activities, and traditional titles (Simo-Bobda & Supérieure 1997, p. 101) even in official language constructions. In a study conducted by Mbufong (2013), it was found that home languages of people have phonological, lexical, and grammatical influences on English:

In phonology, it came to light that Lamso, a language spoken in the northwest region of Cameroon, is characterised by a monophongisation of diphthongs. Thus, words with the diphthong /əu/ become /u/. Examples are: goat /gəut/ (Standard English) was pronounced as /gut/; while show /ʃəu/ was pronounced as /ʃu/. Again the pure vowel sound /i:/ was realised by Lamso speakers as /ɛ/. For instance, meat /mi:t/ is pronounced as /mɛt/, and mean /mi:n/ is pronounced as /mɛn/ (Mbufong, 2013, p. 478).   In Mokpe and in Mungaka, (other languages spoken in Cameroon), the sound /r/ was realised as /l/. We see examples in words like: rubber /rʌbə/ as /lʌbə/, run /rʌn/ as /lʌn/ and rice /rais/ as /lais/ (Mbufong, 2013, p. 478).

In lexis, some words that have been borrowed into Standard English are highlighted in the following expressions:

i.　　I bought a kaba for my wife – 'I bought a big loose dress for my wife '

ii.　　My mother's bouba is white – 'My mother's blouse is white'

iii.　　I bought some mboti in Soppo market – 'I bought some clothes in the supermarket'

(Mbufong, 2013, p. 479).

Grammatically, the influence that Cameroonian native languages have had on Standard English is illustrated in Table 1:

Table 1. Standard English vs. Home Language and Cameroonian English

Standard English	Home languages	Cameroonian English
1) To smell I can <u>smell</u> rice	Mungaka: nju dzet Mokpe: li weja ezrundzu Oroko: di bako esundzu	* I can <u>hear</u> the smell of rice
2) To smoke John is smoking a cigarette	Mungaka: nu ndika Mokpe: Li no zrika Oroko: din a esika	* John is drinking a cigarette

(Adopted from Mbufong, 2013, p. 480)

Some of these examples projected in the Cameroonian English section of Table 1, were once regarded as errors (Mbufong, 2013, p. 481). However, they are now progressively more acknowledged as unique contributions to the

English language. Thus, these are natural results of long-lasting linguistic and cultural contacts and their implications on formal languages (Mbufong, 2013, p. 481). So, the processes of Englishization and Indigenization have since been strong in Cameroon. But, doubts have been raised as to whether these two processes would not affect the Cameroonian communicative competence of English in a global context.

3. The Case of Ghana

Ghana is traditionally multilingual – many languages are spoken in the country. In an earlier article, Ure (1968) argues that this fact – multilingualism in Ghana – must be taken into consideration when planning language teaching at all levels. Usually, a variety of different languages spoken is linked with a range of diverse language use (Ure, 1968). So, in a multilingual classroom setting, it is expected that some of these Ghanaian indigenous languages will infiltrate language teaching sessions in the classroom, although there is a formal language of instruction – English.

A study conducted by Adika (2012, p. 151) discloses that '... English in Ghana has been expanding against the backdrop of an intensely multilingual environment.' This growth which has typically been felt in the areas of vocabulary, pronunciation, and idiomatic use, came about as a result of the linguistic and cultural syntheses (Adika, 2012, p. 152). In vocabulary, this expansion has resulted in the coinage of words such as: 'booker', 'bush meat', 'chewing sponge', 'chop bar', 'letter writing', and 'chop box' (Dako, 2003 as cited in Adika, 2012). Again, the study revealed that in pronunciation, some RPs have been realised in Ghanaian English (GhaE) pronunciations:

Word	GhaE	RP
Money	[mani]	[mʌni]
Learn	[lɛn]	[l3:n]
Third	[tɛd]	[Ɵ3:d]
Visitor	[visita]	[vizitə]

(Adika, 2012, p. 160).

The fusion of linguistic and cultural phenomena has also resulted in Ghanaian Pidgin English (GhaPE). So, in the multilingual Ghanaian classroom context, one is likely to hear expressions such as:

a. dè   gɛt strɔŋ pas wi

  3PL get strong pass 1SG

  'They became stronger than us.'

b. dat ples   no   mɔskito-s.

  DEM place   NEG moskito-PL

  'There are no mosquitoes in that place.'

  (Adika, 2012, p. 160).

Sekyi-Baidoo & Koranteng (2008, p. 124) note that the changes that the English language is going through in the Ghanaian context are so widespread that even official English general greetings have succumbed to these modifications. These processes are part of the general development of nativisation or indigenisation of the English language in the second language situation in Ghana (Sekyi-Baidoo & Koranteng, 2008, p. 124). Their study revealed some indigenised Ghanaian greetings and responses:

Greeting	Response
Yessa	Yessa/Yessa, Sir/ Yessa, Massa
Correct	Correct Sir/No mistake
I salute (Sir)	I salute/I surrender, Sir/I catch it
How be?	Cool things

(Sekyi-Baidoo & Koranteng, 2008, p. 124).

It is evident from the foregoing that in a multilingual Ghanaian classroom setting, it is likely that the L2 teacher and the learners may witness some of these nativised forms of greeting. Owusu-Ansah (1997, p. 24) defines nativisation as a process of linguistic and sociolinguistic variation through which an exterior language becomes part of the culture of a community that uses it as a supplementary language. In the school setting in Ghana, English is the official language of the higher communities – upper primary school, JHS, SHS, and tertiary levels. Therefore, the influx of

these several first languages which leads to nativisation of English has the propensity of affecting formality. The outcome is mixed varieties. This can be illustrated as:
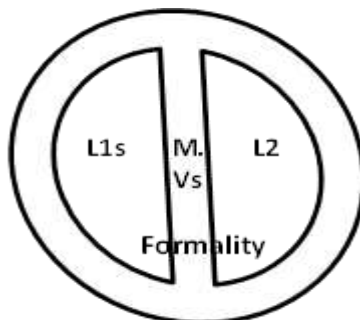

Figure 1. Language Choice and Formality in Ghana

Original concept adopted from Owusu-Ansah (1997, p. 26)

In Figure 1, L1s are the various Ghanaian languages used in the multilingual classroom; L2 is the English language and M.Vs, are the mixed varieties of both L1 and L2. The double arrow represents the level of formality. If the arrow skews towards the direction of L1s, formality in the classroom setting becomes low. If it goes towards the direction of L2, formality is high. If it stays in the middle, the classroom in question is likely to witness high cases of mixed varieties. Perhaps, language teachers in the SLA classrooms should constantly remind L2 learners of the difference between Standard English and indigenised Ghanaian English forms. This could probably inform the learner about the characteristics of the two forms and when and where they could use them. Official English language should not be perceived as disrupting its other indigenised forms and the local languages; rather it should be considered as supplementing them and constituting an essential part of the local language ecology (Norrish, 1997, p. 6). For instance, Owusu et al. (2016, p.547) observe that the New Englishes (i.e. Pidgins and Creoles) are not automatically aberrant forms, but are right in their context, particularly where they provide the linguistic requirements of their respective speech communities.

4. The Cases of Guinea-Bissau and Niger

Hovens (2002) conducted a study about language use in the classrooms of Niger and Guinea-Bissau. The study focused on the performance of pupils in monolingual schools (ET) and experimental bilingual schools (EE) in both countries. The languages used in the monolingual schools were Portuguese (in the case of Guinea-Bissau) and French (in the case of Niger). The objective of the study was to evaluate the impact of bilingual education as it has been practised in these two West African countries. In both countries, tests of mathematics, reading, and writing were applied. The findings of the study revealed that:

1. In mathematics, third grade bilingual (EE) pupils of Guinea-Bissau perform better than their monolingual counterparts. But, in Niger, all pupils (EE and ET) who were tested in their L1 did significantly better than those tested in French (Hovens, 2002, p. 258). The pupils could count and calculate better in their languages. Thus, most pupils at the primary level can solve mathematical problems better in L1 than they do in L2 (Hovens, 2002, p. 258).

2. In language, the study found out that EE pupils (in the case of Guinea-Bissau) read better; and ET pupils were not capable of reading at all in grade 1. Still, on language, and in Niger, it was found that EE pupils read much better in L1 than their ET peers who had had the privilege of studying in L1 only (Hovens, 2002, p. 258-259).

3. In Both Guinea-Bissau and Niger, boys were found to have performed better than girls in all tested subjects; but the difference between the two sexes was smaller in EE than in ET (Hovens, 2002, p. 261).

4. Cumulatively, the study revealed that pupils in the bilingual system have an advantage if tested in their national language. But, if pupils are tested in French, there is hardly any difference between bilingual and monolingual schools (Hovens, 2002, p. 257). Hovens' (2002) study corroborates Owusu et al's (2015) study where bilingual students outperformed their English monolingual and First language monolingual contemporaries in academic writing tasks.

5. The Case of Nigeria

Nigeria is Africa's most populous state (Toyin & Matthew, 2008). Because of this, the country provides the right

linguistic landscape for a study like this. The Federal Republic of Nigeria has 36 states, making it the most populous state on the entire African continent. Nigeria is known for its extreme linguistic diversity, and can boast of about 400 languages (Elugbe, 1994). Because of this extreme linguistic diversity of Nigeria, Amaechi (2013) conducted a study on the use of indigenous languages in the Nigerian Education sector and proposed that as a way of safeguarding Nigeria's indigenous languages, there is the need for the proper implementation of the indigenous language policy in the kindergarten and nursery schools. Thus, studies on indigenous languages in Nigeria envisaged the numerous challenges that could arise in the L2 classroom setting.

Oluwole (2008, p. 122-123) argues about some major challenges confronting the teaching and learning of grammar in Nigerian secondary schools. The synopses of the argument are language transfer (Interlingual) and faulty application of rules (Intralingual). The transfer of learners' first language patterns into those of the second language constitutes one of the bases for interlingual interference. A problem arises when this transfer harms the second language of the learner. Indeed, there are diverse influences that culture has on the teaching and learning of English as a second language. Oluwole's (2008) position on LI is clear – it brings about 'interlingual' interference and that results in a difficult phenomenon. This assertion is debatable though. This is because within their socio-cultural environment, it is always difficult for non-native speakers of English to develop full competence of Standard English language (at the phonological, syntactic, and lexical levels). Therefore, an L1 negative transfer could lead to several errors such as omission, overuse of some forms, avoidance, and substitution in the acquisition of the L2. Culture can also have a positive influence on the teaching and learning of the English language. Consequently, Ellis (2002, p. 3) argues that we have positive transfer and negative transfer. By positive transfer, he implies that the L1 can facilitate the acquisition and learning of the L2; and by negative transfer, he infers that the L1 can impede the acquisition and learning of the L2.

Benson, Anyalebechi & Ariole (2017) focus on matters and tasks linked with supporting indigenous language by library and information science professionals, and argue that the challenges confronting indigenous languages in Nigeria included: diversity of indigenous language, non-proficiency in indigenous languages, non-documentation of indigenous language and the inclination of government and policymakers towards the use of English language. Thus, without proper policy documents, the use of language in the multilingual classroom setting of Nigeria could have several challenges for stakeholders of teaching and learning in Nigeria.

Orji and Udeze (2021) conducted a study on the use of indigenous languages in tertiary education in Nigeria. The human subjects who provided the data were 100 male and female students who were randomly selected from the Language Departments of Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka, Nigeria. Questionnaire items based on the research questions of the study were used to solicit primary data from the respondents. The questionnaires were structured using the four-point Likert Scale of agree, disagree, strongly agree, and strongly disagree. The responses were analysed using the simple percentage method. The study revealed that a greater percentage of students cannot cope with the use of indigenous language for facilitating language courses in SLA classrooms. Again, the study revealed that learners displayed triviality in learning their indigenous language in the course of their language courses (Orji and Udeze, 2021). The study, thus, recommended the following as possible means of developing learners' interest in the use of indigenous languages:

1. Provision of conducive classrooms for learning,
2. Establishment of language-immersion programmes for students,
3. Establishment of language libraries,
4. Establishment of centre for advancement of indigenous languages,
5. Promotion of books written in indigenious language,
6. Translation of literary works to audio contents in indigenous language, and
7. The use of ICT and language laboratories in fostering the interest of learners in indigenous languages
   (Orji and Udeze, 2021).

Though the study recommended innovative ways of promoting indigenous languages in SLA classrooms, the study failed to establish the merits or challenges that the use of indigenous languages in SLA classrooms poses to the SLA learners in their bid to learn the English language, which is the language of education, and the international language of Nigeria.

6. Conclusion

Bilingualism is an aspect of the rich culture of Africa. This cultural identity of most indigenous Africans is usually exhibited in several contexts, including the formal classroom situation. A classical assertion by Donne (1624) as cited in Brown (2000, p. 176) indicates that no entity is an island, entire of itself; every man is a portion of the continent, a chunk of the main. Thus, culture is a way of life of a group of people. This includes their food, dance(s), music, dress code, values, institutions, beliefs, customs, and language. Larson and Smalley (1972) describe culture as a "blueprint" that regulate the conduct of people in a speech community and is incubated in family life. Thus, culture has to do with the ideas, customs, skills, arts, and tools that characterize a given group of people in a given time (Brown, 2000, p. 177).

Therefore, it must be observed that culture and language are inseparable. According to Jin-feng (2007, p. 75), 'a language does not exist on its own but is embedded in the culture of a nation and reflects its beliefs and sentiments.' Consequently, the second languages in West African states which have been part of the various sub-regions came to meet the indigenous languages. Thus, the relationship between the linguistic and sociolinguistic context of West African states has been longstanding. The effect is nativisation, indigenisation, or localisation of Standard English and French. In the multilingual classroom setting, these forms should not be seen as deviant forms per se. Even if they are discouraged in the formal setting, the language teacher must educate the L2 learner in the West African classroom setting about the similarities and differences of the standard language and other variant forms, and when and how to use each form.

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