THE CONCEPT OF BILINGUALISM AND ITS LIMITING FACTORS

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Abstract

One of the challenges which a second language learner faces is the herculean task of acquiring communicative competence in a language that belongs to a totally different family and culture. People from diverse linguistic communities are compelled to learn a second/foreign language despite their linguistic background. The effect of such language contact is bilingualism. The notion of bilingualism has raised some questionable assumptions on language proficiency and on its effect on academic development. Many people feel that bilingualism has some inherent problems because it is believed to be confusing or harmful. Bilingualism is said to be counterproductive to the child's welfare to develop and maintain proficiency in more than one language. Consequently, many people including professionals advise parents not to bring their children up bilingually. Amidst such beliefs and arguments, one may be deceived to believe that bilingualism has no iota of merit attached to it. It has been discovered that many factors have come to bear on bilingualism. Some of these factors are linguistically based, while some are educationally, religiously and politically based. This paper therefore aims at illuminating the concept vis-a-vis the factors that militate against it. We should therefore take cognizance of the fact that the study of bilingualism is important now that our society is situated in a multicultural world.

Keywords: Language proficiency, Bilingualism, Linguistic communities, Code-switching, Code-mixing

Introduction

English is spoken by billions of people worldwide. In Nigeria, it has been accepted as a second language and a lingua franca right from the time the country was colonized by Great Britain. Since that time, Nigerians started using English in all their academic pursuits and in all other sectors of the economy. The Nigerian child now receives instructions in English which is also used for teaching the other subjects of the curriculum except the mother tongue. The inevitable result of the two languages in contact is referred to as bilingualism. Bilingualism is therefore, the existence of two languages in the linguistic repertoire of an individual or a speech community. It is the product of second language (L2) learning after the first language (L1) has been acquired through non tutored exposure or formal instruction. One long standing query about bilingualism is whether instruction in a second language helps or hinders the students. Some linguists have argued that bilingualism was and still is the explanation for the linguistic failure of certain groups of people. It is equally believed that the two languages in the learner's speech repertoire may result in a substantial number of persistent mistakes made by speakers of the two languages. The issue of bilingualism has become controversial and it is consequently a linguistic problem. The main thrust of this paper therefore is to examine the concept of bilingualism, its consequences/outcome and the factors that militate against it.

The Concept of Bilingualism in the Nigerian context

The term 'bilingualism' means the existence of two languages in the linguistic repertoire of an individual or a speech community. The two languages exist side by side and are used by the individual or community. It must be stressed that each of the two languages has its own distinct

phonological, lexical, grammatical and discourse rules. In Nigeria for instance, an individual bilingual is one who can speak only Igbo and English, Hausa and English, Yoruba and English or any other native tongue and English.

Naturally, in a situation where two languages are alternately used, the presumption is that one of the languages will be more prominent than the other. The notion of prominence is made manifest when we consider the different roles assigned to each language and the number of people that speak a particular language. In the Nigerian context, there is now a predominant role assigned to the English language. English is now the official language for specialised education, language of the mass media and the medium of social communication. More importantly, it is a world language; the *lingua franca* of the modern era. In view of the roles assigned to the English language, Akindele and Adegbite have this to say:

> ...the English language is used by the minority and is purely
>   restricted to the administrative, judicial, educational and mass
>   media set ups. It is in the light of this that the English language
>   could be regarded as performing national and official functions (105).

The mother tongue [MT] on the other hand, plays other subsidiary roles as instrumental, regulatory and interaction as well as other minor roles. The bilingual child therefore speaks two languages namely: the mother tongue and the English language. It is pertinent to mention that there are people who can understand or speak any other indigenous/foreign language apart from their native tongue. It is not surprising in that our society is now situated in a multicultural/multilingual world and Nigeria however, should not be an exception. Since the English language performs the major/national functions of the country, we can vividly say without fear of contradiction that the English language occupies a unique and prominent position in Nigeria. Sociolinguistically speaking, therefore, the English language performs a predominant role when compared to the roles of other indigenous languages despite its colonial origin; the English language is clearly a language whose advent into Africa cannot be dissociated from colonialism.

Languages in contact are bound to develop variations and mutations. The reason is that such languages are compelled to accommodate the variations of locality. Some factors are responsible for such variations. Therefore, factors such as cultural, political and economical come to bear on the language. The implication is that the existence of such varieties of English poses difficulty to the second language learner. Consequently, the second language learner is faced with the herculean task of acquiring communicative competence in a language that belongs to a totally different family and culture but when learnt, it becomes an indispensable asset.

The Outcome of Bilingualism
Bilingualism is the ability to have facility in two languages which are spoken in the community with almost equal competence for all purposes in the life of the bilingual. The effects of bilingualism are made manifest through bilinguals and the society at large. One of the major positive consequences of bilingualism is the acquisition of two languages. The implication is that a bilingual is linguistically equipped to converse with a larger array of individuals.

Secondly, the effect of bilingualism is that one of the languages because it is predominately used, may gain ascendancy over the other. The result is that one language eliminates the other. In most cases, the mother tongue usually suffers because it is no longer in constant usage as a

result of the overuse of the more fashionable new comer, the second language. Eyisi and Ezeuko reaffirmed this fact when they vividly pointed out that:

> ...the implacable desire for a mastery of the English
> Language inevitably resulted in a progressively waning
> enthusiasm for the local languages. So much attention and
> resources were deposited into the teaching and learning of
> English language in Nigeria, innovations in methods needed
> for effective teaching were fortified. ...these available
> literature books in English sounded a death knell on the
> study of the vernacular (198).

Another outcome of bilingualism is the development of linguistic features of code-mixing and code-switching. It must be pointed out that bilinguals differ in the skill with which they use the two languages. For some, there is every tendency to switch from one language to the other depending to a great extent, at the age in which the languages were acquired or learnt. In the words of Olaoye, code-switching refers to the successive, alternate use of two different codes or even varieties of the same code (131). One who code-switches uses two languages interchangeably in a single discourse. Code-mixing on the other hand is the random alternation of two languages within a sentence. Therefore, code-mixing and code-switching usually occur as a result of bilingualism.

As we had pointed out earlier, the use of two languages in the speech repertoire of an individual or society results in language shift or displacement. It is worthy of mention to state that such contact equally results in a new language. Examples are pidgin and Creole. Pidgin is an auxiliary language that develops when people who are speaking different languages are brought together and are forced to develop a common means of communication, such a variety is a product of bilingualism.

An outcome of bilingualism which should not be ignored is the 'interference phenomenon'. Interference occurs when an individual transfers some of the linguistic codes of one language into the other. Akindele refers to it as a ''situation whereby two different languages overlap. In such a situation, the linguistic systems of one of the languages are transferred into the other in the process of producing the latter which is the second or target language (39)''. Interference occurs consciously or inadvertently when the speaker brings in pronunciation, sentence formation and vocabulary of the source language while using a target language. It may occur at the phonological, grammatical, lexical, and discourse levels. For instance, at the phonetic level, a second language learner may experience some difficulties in his quest to pronounce some sounds. A learner may erroneously pronounce 'tink' for 'think', 'tank' for 'thank' because the sound /Ө/ is non-existent in some Nigerian languages.

At the grammatical level, we may observe these erroneous expressions:
I can hear a smell (for I can perceive a smell)
Do not put your mouth into this matter (for do not interfere in this matter)
He has a bad mouth (for he is immodest in speech).
The above expressions point to the fact that the interference phenomenon is one of the causes of some grammatical and syntactic errors in the English language. In view of this, Wilkins states that:

> when learning a foreign language, an individual already
> knows his mother tongue, and it is this which he attempts
> to transfer. The transfer may prove justified because the

structure of the two languages is similar, in that case,
we get positive transfer or facilitation or it may prove
unjustified because the two languages are different, in that case,
we get negative transfer or interference(52).

It must be stated that interference is now one of the most controversial issues in error analysis and has its antecedents in the question of how similar the first and second language learning processes are. It may occur at particular developmental stages.

Bilingualism has also brought about biculturalism. Language and culture are so closely related. Language either in its spoken or written form is the medium through which culture is expressed. This invariably implies that a bilingual consequently becomes bicultural. At the societal level, Nigeria has been described as a multilingual, multicultural and a multinational polity. This is because Nigeria is enriched with numerous indigenous languages and a multiplicity of the culture of the different people that speak such languages. Broadly speaking, there are now many forms of the English language which are identifiably different from each other like American English, Singaporean English, British English and Nigerian English. B.B. Kachru has advised that for any variety to be regarded as standard, such variety should be assessed from the point of view of what is he called ''relevant factors of appropriateness, acceptance and intelligibility (30)''.

It must be stated that because of the different people of the world who speak English, the English language is bound to reflect a diversity of disparate cultures and since no language is used to its fullest extent by its native speakers, there is always room left for the non-native speakers to exploit it in the unique form of English usage, phonetically, lexically, syntactically, semantically, and pragmatically. The above-mentioned are one out of the numerous consequences of bilingualism which should not be considered as impediments but should be viewed positively so as to spur us up in our resolve to achieve proficiency in the second language.

Factors Militating against Bilingualism
Despite the numerous benefits accruing from the concept of having two languages in the speech repertoire of an individual, numerous factors militate against bilingualism. Some of these factors are linguistically based while some are educationally and politically based.
   1. **Linguistically oriented factors**
Some language groups have developed a negative attitude towards bilingualism in view of the fact that they maintain that bilingualism leads to language shift and consequent death of minority languages. In Nigeria for instance, some social groups have organized programmes like Ozuruimo festival, and Ahia-Jioku lectures in order to maintain the native tongue-Igbo language. Some again have viewed certain bilingual behaviour like code-switching and interference as impure admixtures that have posed a threat to the structural integrity and maintenance of the minority languages. Romaine believes that those who exhibit such bilingual behaviour are people who cannot express themselves in grammatically acceptable structures (205).
   2. **Educationally oriented factors**
In a second language situation like Nigeria, bilinguals are usually produced by teaching English as an L2 in English–speaking context. In such contexts, bilingual programs have been drawn with a view to producing high level bilinguals. However, many critics now hold the view that bilingualism was and still is the explanation for the failure/poor performance of certain groups of people. It is agreed that in the acquisition of a second language, more mental effort has to

be expended but in order to achieve optimum proficiency, it behoves our educational administrators to focus on developing programs that will ensure educational achievement and which will at the same time reduce the risk of reading failure among second language learners.

3. Political oriented factors

Bilingualism is a necessary condition for the country's development and growth. However, conflicts about fundamental inequalities between groups that speak different languages have arisen. Little wonder the Federal Ministry of Education has incorporated the study of any one of the native languages into the curriculum of education-to ensure equality. Again, in the Nigerian context, the socio-political and economic nature is not matched by the patterns of its bilingual education. There is now an argument as to whether children should be exposed to the second language at an early stage after the first language has been adequately/conclusively acquired. Some linguists blatantly argue that the earlier children learn a second language, the better off they are, while another argue that children should be extensively exposed to the native tongue before exposure to the second language. In America, for instance, there are three stages, namely:

i. First language classrooms in which all interaction occurs in the children's primary language.
ii. Bilingual classroom in which interaction is split between the native tongue and English.
iii. English language classrooms in which English is exclusively used in communication.

Some political factors have therefore come to bear on bilingualism. It is advised that our educational programs should be modified in order to meet the needs of our people.

4. Religious oriented factors

It is evident that Christianity and Islam promote bilingualism. In Christendom, for instance, two languages are used- the mother tongue and the English language except in a few cases where Latin is used to celebrate the homily. Islam also permits the use of two languages but bilingualism becomes inhibited on the ground that translated items make a text to lose the author's originally intended meaning. Consequently, it becomes blasphemous to use the translated version for prayers and other rituals in Islamic religion.

Conclusion

The whole essence of studying any second language is to become a bilingual. This is because every normal human being naturally acquires the language of his immediate environment. When a person masters two languages, he automatically becomes a bilingual. Bilingualism is therefore a matter of necessity since we live in a society imbued with diverse languages and cultures. In this paper therefore, we have x-rayed the concept of bilingualism vis-a-vis the factors that militate against it. We should therefore take cognizance of the fact that the face of education is now situated in a multi-cultural global society and as such, we cannot avoid contact with people from different cultures and societies. Hence, we advise that the teaching of the English language should be carried out within a truly bilingual system. Since language is culture-bound, the English language must be able to co-exist with the indigenous languages both in the curriculum and in the world outside education.

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