

Language status and covert prestige in the code switching practices of Mathematics, Science and Biology teachers

ABSTRACT

This article reports on one aspect of an investigation into the code switching practices of a group of South African teachers who are so-called ESL speakers of English, but who teach Mathematics, Science and Biology through the medium of English to secondary school students who are also so-called ESL users of English. In the course of the investigation it emerged that, because of the covert prestige or overt status of particular codes, teachers would switch mainly to and from that code. This code switching practice may introduce a second layer of linguistic complexity, since this code is, once again, not the home language of the students or teachers. In fact, it cannot be described as the home language of any particular group, because this particular language is a 'street' variety of Zulu and Northern Sotho and has the status of an urban, sophisticated code.

In the initial phase of the study ethnographic classroom observations were undertaken to record the extent and nature of code switching practices. Follow-up interviews (unstructured) were conducted with the teachers to check the researchers' impressions against the teachers' intentions and perceptions of what they were doing. During the second round of interviews a questionnaire about the status of the various Southern African languages was used as the main topic for discussion. This questionnaire was then distributed to senior students (who were in the classes that were observed), to practising teachers doing in-service upgrading courses at Vista University and to teacher trainees at the Mamelodi Campus of Vista University. The results of these questionnaires constitute the most important data for this study and raises important issues about the role of African languages in education.

Introduction

This article reports on an issue that arose from ethnographic observations of the way in which Mathematics, Science and Biology teachers code switch when they teach. The teachers whose practice of code switching was investigated, were all so-called ESL speakers who, according to school policy, have to use English as the language of learning and teaching (medium of instruction) to teach so-called ESL learners who, in many instances, share a home language with their teacher. The use of code switching in classroom situations like these is not well-documented, but anecdotal evidence suggests that it is common practice. This article will therefore refer briefly

covert prestige as sociolinguistic aspects that affect not only classroom communication in particular, but language planning in general.

The use of English as a language of learning and teaching with speakers who use it as an additional language is seen as similar to immersion programmes that are run in the USA and Canada. However, the situation is substantially different in postcolonial countries in Africa and India, where English as an additional language is widely used in education. In the discussion below some insights from immersion programmes will be referred to, but always with the South African situation in mind. Furthermore, the discussion does not enter into debates around home language instruction directly, although this matter is at the heart of the problems raised here.

Code switching, code mixing and bilingual education

In this article the term *code switching* is used to indicate intersentential and intrasentential *code mixing* as well as *code switches* between longer stretches of text, but **not** borrowing of the kind where a foreign word has been integrated into the lexical system of the language (for example, the Nothern Sotho word *sekolo* which was borrowed and adapted from the Afrikaans *skool* or English *school*). We chose this very broad and general description in the first place because the focus in this article is not on an analysis of code switching, but rather on the situation that exists in predominantly black schools where code switching is the unmarked choice for high school students (as described by Kieswetter 1995). Lawrence (1999:72) describes a similar situation at teachers' training college. In the second place, the teachers in our study use both code switching and code mixing mainly as a solidarity marker. Wardhaugh (1992: 108) indicates that *code mixing* is typically used as a solidarity marker in multilingual communities, and, as we will argue, this seems true of the *code switching* behaviour in our study as well.

Code switching is normally disparaged as an inability to keep two languages separate, or it is seen as an indication that the speaker is from a lower socio-economic group (Kieswetter, 1995: 2). Finlayson and Slabbert note (1997: 419): "... the use of CS is unlikely to enjoy official blessing from all language authority purists. This is simply because any one language group would not like to openly concede that the use of a rival language in an accommodation event, would enhance not only communication but also the bridging of language separation".

As a teaching strategy in immersion and/or bilingual classrooms, the use of two or more languages is controversial and Tarone and Swain (1995: 168) state that "[i]t is fundamental and axiomatic to the philosophy of language immersion programs that almost all academic content should be taught through the L2". Although Tarone and Swain (1995: 166) acknowledge that "*diglossia* may be the norm" in immersion classrooms, they do not consider the use of the students' home language as suitable for *instruction*, which is in accordance with the goals of immersion programmes. This is *why* they are called immersion programmes. Cummins and Swain (1986: 105–108) argue convincingly against bilingual instruction where the teacher 'mixes' the two languages (by constantly translating back and forth), and argue for a 'separation approach' because, by separating the two languages in time and space, students need to make the effort to understand the second language: they cannot 'tune out' and wait for the translation. However, and more importantly, Cummins and Swain think that a separation approach will help to "overcome the *natural* tendency of minority language speakers to shift to the majority language" (Cummins and Swain, 1986: 108). What this means in practice is that, if the goal of bilingual instruction is to develop the academic use of two languages, a 'mixing' approach will eventually lead to the use of only the majority language, because of this 'natural tendency'.

Let us look at the first argument: that students will 'tune out' and wait for the home language

explanation to follow. This would be a real danger in South African classrooms because students need to write national Science, Mathematics and Biology examinations in English. However, code switching as a sociolinguistic strategy does not generally fulfil the function of translation. It signals, among others, a number of metaphorical functions such as solidarity, membership (or aspirations to membership) of an urban culture, or showing off. This is well illustrated in the following exchange where a child will use the standard form with parents or a teacher and will code switch when communicating with her peers:

1. *Ge o nyaka wear a smart o tla tshwanna ke go spana* (peer group)
2. *Ge o nyaka diaparo tše botse o tla swanela ke šoma* (teacher or parent)
[If you want to dress smartly you'll have to have a job]

In terms of definitions of diglossia, it is not clear that code switching of this nature (in the classroom) will lead to a diglossic situation. According to Wardhaugh (1992: 90) diglossia indicates a "clear functional separation" between two codes and Ferguson (1959: 232) describes it as a "relatively stable language situation" where 'high' and 'low' codes co-exist in strictly circumscribed domains. This is manifestly not the case where code mixing is concerned. The type of diglossic situation that Tarone and Swain have in mind may exist in Canada, where children use one code in the classroom and another outside it, but in South African schools such a strict division does not exist. Furthermore, one cannot argue for a 'clear functional separation' in terms of the addressee (choosing one code for peers and another for the teacher), because the teachers code switch and mix as well, and this in a language situation that is highly unstable, as will be indicated below.

The second argument (that there will be a natural tendency for minority language students to shift to the majority language when they are not separated in time and place) is not relevant in the South African context. If we contrast the position of English as a language of learning and teaching with that of other South African languages (with the possible exception of Afrikaans) in an effort to apply this argument to our situation, we need to look at the status and credibility of the other languages in the classroom. In Cummins and Swain's native Canada, English is the majority language. In South Africa, English is not spoken by the majority of the population, but it has a very high status as a language of learning and teaching. Therefore, even if we substitute 'majority language' with 'high status language', the fact still remains that we are not concerned here with a bilingual situation where a minority language, or in the case of South Africa a low status language, will be subconsciously 'edged out' if both languages were to be used in the same class. The low status languages in South Africa are very much out of the classroom picture altogether, and code switching is basically the only evidence of its existence. The high status language has already edged out the low status languages.

Code switching in South African schools

We argued in an earlier article (Van der Walt, Mabule and De Beer, 2001) that there may be good reasons for code switching in South African classrooms where teachers and students share a number of African languages and use English as the language of learning and teaching¹. We argued that insights from the *immersion* model must be treated with care because *immersion* almost inevitably becomes *submersion*. McLaughlin (1997: 94) reminds us that "[t]he need to

1. The current focus of the Department of Education and the Education ministry on elevating Science education led to the choice of these subjects.

learn English is secondary to quality communication through the development of basic literacy and learning skills”.

The generic, outcomes-based syllabus for the learning area Language, Literacy and Communication seems to be concerned about the extent and depth of learning that takes place when only English is used for instruction and learning. A study of assessment criteria and range statements for grades 1 to 9, as described in a discussion document by the Department of Education (1997), reveals that students are actively encouraged to **code switch**, mainly, it seems, to facilitate learning. In the recently published report of the working group on Values in Education (2000), recommendations on the value of multilingualism include:

- That learners always be given the opportunity to study through their mother tongue;
- That teachers be trained to be able to teach in more languages.

The idea of ‘mother tongue instruction’ or the use of the ‘vernacular’ in South African classrooms is an emotional issue and linguistic and pedagogic considerations seem to be at odds with parents’ hopes and intentions for their children. Furthermore, the perception (justifiable or otherwise) exists that African languages are not ‘developed’ enough to teach Mathematics, Science and Biology. In a survey that evaluated the status of teaching and use of African languages in higher education, Machungo (1998: 32) points out that “African languages as vehicles of science and technology is a goal far from being achieved”.

In an earlier article (Van der Walt, Mabule and De Beer, 2001) we also argued that code switching is almost like letting the L1 in at the back door. The use of code switching to illustrate or contextualise material or to create solidarity can be explored as didactic tools without compromising students’, teachers’ and parents’ expectations for education.

Classroom observation project

The investigation that we set out to do was to determine the extent of code switching in Mathematics, Science and Biology classrooms at a secondary school in Mamelodi, a township to the northeast of Pretoria. The purpose of the investigation was to determine the extent and nature of code switching in these classrooms. Our investigations were exploratory and for that reason we chose classroom observation, as a type of non-participant observation, which is regarded as suitable for exploratory research (Bless and Higson-Smith, 1995: 45). The observations focused on recording instances and circumstances of code switching from English to another language. It is in the course of our classroom observations that the topic of this article emerged.

On the basis of anecdotal evidence and experiences of colleagues in the Science Faculty, we decided to determine whether teachers of Mathematics, Science and Biology actually ‘use the vernacular’ in their classrooms as much as their colleagues in departments of English claimed they were doing. To obviate the research problem of teachers changing their behaviour when they know they are being observed, we chose this particular secondary school because the Vista University Distance Education Campus had built up a good relationship with it (some of the teachers were acting as external markers of Vista University student assignments) and most teachers knew two of the researchers personally. We hoped that these factors would mitigate the stressfulness of classroom observations and that the teachers would teach as they normally do.

Moreover, since code switching or ‘teaching in the vernacular’ is generally frowned upon by principals and language teachers, we hoped that the fact that the teachers knew us would result in ordinary, everyday teaching, and not in carefully rehearsed, monolingual classes. We also invited the staff of the language departments and of the Science, Mathematics and Biology departments to

a meeting where we explained the project and tried to emphasise our 'neutrality' in terms of the exclusive use of English or the 'vernacular'. We asked for volunteers (for classroom observation and a workshop afterwards) and promised, in return, to help with matric examination preparation.

The classroom observations that we planned had to be approved by the principal of the school involved. In accordance with the school's language policy (as formulated by the governing body) and received 'teacher wisdom', he believed strongly that teachers should use only English when teaching. This probably influenced the extent to which teachers felt free to code switch. Six teachers of grades 11 and 12 students volunteered to be observed teaching Mathematics, Science and Biology. Without providing a full account of the classroom observations, the following was noted:

- The one (Mathematics) teacher who felt strongly that code switching should be used, switched regularly from English to Northern Sotho and to Zulu;
- Two (Science) teachers who were quite positive about code switching used Northern Sotho to rephrase English explanations and to introduce a new topic by putting it in the context of a familiar situation in Northern Sotho;
- The other Mathematics teacher would switch to Northern Sotho when students struggled in their groups (i.e. the communication took place with individual students in an off-record manner);
- The two Biology teachers checked comprehension by means of a short question in Northern Sotho (roughly translated as *Okay? Or Understand?*), in other words there was no real code switching to speak of.

In the first three cases the code switching took place regularly, on average for about 25% of the time. The teachers appeared to be totally at ease and students were concentrating hard. In all but one class students sat in fixed rows and in this one class, where the tables could be moved, discussion in groups took place in the 'vernacular' and questions to the teacher in English.

After the observations a workshop was held with the teachers involved and at this point the teachers explained that the language they switched to was not 'pure' Northern Sotho, because students regarded this as too 'rural'. This is in agreement with observations by Finlayson and Slabbert (1997: 388), that Tswana or Pedi would be associated with people arriving in Soweto from rural areas, with connotations of such people being 'naïve' or 'rustic'. The one teacher who also switched to Zulu indicated that she did not speak the 'real' language, because that would not be understood by the students. What she switched to in both cases were localised and urban versions of Sotho and Zulu, a common practice described by Finlayson and Slabbert (1997: 383) as "the use of 'deep' ('pure', 'rural') versus the urban varieties". They did not even mention other languages like Tsonga or Tswana, languages that are well represented in Mamelodi.

Code switching is strongly determined by social circumstances, and the language being switched to or from may be intended to say something about the speaker's social stance: to (among others) indicate solidarity or identification with a specific group (as is often the case with young adults), or rejection of a specific group (often a rejection of the rural, traditional people's way of speaking). This phenomenon, as we will argue, may have serious implications for the use of home languages and code switching as pedagogical tools².

2. In a previous article we make the case for responsible code switching as a pedagogical tool. See Van der Walt, Mabule and De Beer (2001).

Covert prestige: negotiating for meaning

Covert prestige is a phenomenon described by Trudgill (1972) as one of the many factors that influence students' willingness to attain standard language accuracy. There is a positive attitude toward non-standard varieties of language and accents. Although it is similar to the concept of status, it implies a kind of silent, group approval of a variety or accent that is disapproved of generally. This is the kind of language behaviour one often associates with young people who seek the approval of their peers rather than society, because the use of such forms "can confer a level of social prestige that may take priority over the mastery of the spoken target language" (Lefkowitz and Hedgcock, unpublished).

When L2 learners are taught by L2 teachers, as is often the case in South Africa, a substantial part of classroom interaction takes the form of negotiating for meaning with a view to increasing and enhancing comprehension (Carrier, 1999). This is typically what happened in the classrooms we observed, where group interaction took place in the 'vernacular' and where the teacher used the it for 'off-record' talk to students. This type of interaction and subsequent comprehension is vital for achievement in Science, Mathematics and Biology.

Carrier (1999: 73) refers to and agrees with research indicating that the asymmetry in the teacher – student relationship, as well as the social distance between them, negatively influences the amount of negotiation for meaning and, as a consequence, negatively influences the amount of comprehension. The status of English *per se* may increase this asymmetry, although Carrier (1999: 74) quotes evidence that interaction in English between so-called second language speakers of English may result in more negotiation (despite asymmetry in the relationship) because of the perception that misunderstanding could result from either speaker's incompetence.

One of the reasons for code switching by teachers could be an attempt to lessen the social distance brought about by the status of the teacher and the use of English: the teacher code switches to initiate and invite negotiation for meaning, thereby improving comprehension of the subject material. This explanation would certainly account for one of the most common reasons for code switching. If the teacher code switches to a variety that is generally regarded as 'smart' and 'urban', she may also reduce this distance and improve conditions so that students can negotiate for meaning. The main problem in this argument is that, if the teacher should switch to a low status language or variety, this could invite students' ridicule or a negative, emotional (affective) response, thereby negating the possibility of effective negotiation for meaning.

Student attitudes and language status

In our project we came across different language groups with different cultures. According to the teachers, the students preferred the use of a community *lingua franca* rather than their home language. The teachers claimed that students felt more comfortable and accepted when they (the teachers) used the community *lingua franca*.

On the basis of the information provided by the teachers, we wanted to find out what students thought of their teachers' code switching practices and whether they thought that some African languages may be more suitable than others for classroom use. We hoped that this might give us an indication of the covert prestige or difference in languages status.

At this point it is necessary to point out that, within the confines of the research (the respondents and the time limits), we felt that it would be wise to focus our questionnaires on the status of standard African languages rather than the covert prestige of urban varieties of African languages. Our first questionnaire was distributed among secondary school students and teacher

trainees and it seemed unwise to use terms like 'street language' or 'city language' with them, since teachers (and linguists!) themselves are not quite sure of the local currency and connotations of such terms. Sometimes these terms are confused with 'tsotsitaal'. Time constraints (especially at secondary school level) made us dependent on the goodwill of teachers, who eventually felt it would be easier if we just gave them the questionnaires so that they could distribute them when they had a few minutes at the end of the day. This meant we had to make sure that the questionnaire was very clear and simple and it seemed impossible in this context to distinguish among urban and rural varieties of the ten official African languages.

In the light of existing research (e.g. that of Finlayson and Slabbert, 1997), we argued that, since rural varieties have a lower status than urban varieties, the rural varieties of low status languages will have an even lower status, just as the urban varieties of high status languages would be more prestigious. In this way it might be possible to link status with covert prestige. This is not necessarily the case. An example of low status South African languages attaining covert prestige in an urban context was reported on recently in the *Sunday Times*. A popular radio DJ has developed an idiolect which is a mix of Tswana, Pedi, Sotho and Venda and which is very popular with his listeners (Shota, 2002: 13). This cannot, however, be regarded as a full-blown separate variety yet. At the moment it seems that high status African languages will also have localised, urban varieties that have covert prestige. This point will be taken up again in the conclusion.

Our respondents were a group of senior students from the same classes where the observations had taken place and 25 of them completed the questionnaire.³ We will not report on all the questions, only the ones that are directly relevant to our topic. We used a mix of open-ended questions and statements to which students had to indicate their agreement or disagreement on a four-point Likert scale. The results are summarised in Table 1 below (please note that not all the students answered all the questions.)

Table 1

	Agreed	Agreed partly	Disagreed partly	Disagreed
1. <i>Our teachers should rather stick to English</i>	14	7	1	1
2. <i>Some African languages are better for the classroom than others</i>	4	3	7	9

The responses to Question 1 were to be expected, but the responses to the second statement were ambivalent; sufficiently so to predict that there would be answers to the open-ended question that followed directly after it (Table 2).

3. This is a fairly small group of grade 11 and 12 students in small school. The Science and Mathematics classes were always very small (from 16-20 students) and the Biology classes were slightly bigger (up to 30 students).

Table 2

<p><i>If you think that some African languages are more suitable than others for classroom use, please tell us which ones are suitable and which ones are not.</i></p>	<p>Northern Sotho⁴ is better: 11 students, of which 3 also indicated Northern Sotho as their home language.</p>
	<p>Zulu is better: 7 students, of which 2 indicated Zulu as their home language</p>
	<p>Tswana is better: 4 students</p>

Despite the fact that the majority (16/24) **disagreed** with the statement that some African languages are better for the classroom, only 3 students did **not** give an answer to this open-ended question. Even if we accept that students missed the qualifying 'If' of the question, it is still revealing that they contradicted themselves. The predominance of Northern Sotho can be ascribed to the region where the survey was conducted.

The languages students felt were unsuitable, are:

- Tsonga: 5 students, of which 1 indicated Tsonga as her/his home language;
- Venda: 4 students.

These choices also confirm the statement made by Finlayson and Slabbert (1997: 383) that these languages had (and still seem to have) "a generally accepted low status position".

Since this group of high school students was fairly small, we decided to ask similar⁵ questions of Biology and Science teachers who were doing in-service upgrading of their qualifications through Vista University's Distance Education Campus. What we found was that no clear indication of the value of code switching emerged and teachers could not be drawn to comment on the suitability or otherwise of African languages in the classroom.

The results* of the two questions most relevant to our topic are presented in Table 3.

Table 3

<p><i>Would you say that it is good for a teacher to switch between English and other languages in his/her teaching?</i></p>	<p>Yes</p>	<p>No</p>
	<p>58%*</p>	<p>46%*</p>

*The mathematical discrepancy occurred because some students said yes and no.

The reasons given for saying *No* are predictable in terms of what happens in reality in terms of 'received wisdom' about language immersion (only responses that came up repeatedly are reported):

4. In our questionnaires we used the English terms for African languages, for the same reason that we would use German instead of Deutsch.
5. The questions had to be adapted for teacher trainees.

- *Students get too used to explanations in L1 and they will later wait for the teacher to explain and Students 'switch off' and only listen to L1 (exactly the point made by Cummins and Swain, 1986);*
- *Students can't answer or write in L1, they must become used to English and Students will face problems with questions in English.*
- *English is the only language in the examination; no need for switches;*
- *So many scientific words do not appear in African languages.*

We found the reasons for saying *Yes* interesting because they affirm what researchers and innovative teachers have started to report on only recently (only repeat reasons are listed):

- *Students must understand everything: this is not a language lesson and It (code switching) helps clear up misunderstanding (see McLaughlin, 1997: 94);*
- *Learners become active and they participate and Learners who have difficulty also get involved (Hancock, 1997);*
- *The teacher is more flexible, accommodates learners' understanding of their own language (Barkhuizen, 1998: 95; Hancock, 1997 and Wa Kalonji, 1995).*

The open-ended questions: *Would you say that some African languages are better for the classroom than others? If so, which ones?* did not yield any information about African languages. Answers reflected widespread perceptions about the superiority of English as the language of learning and teaching:

- *Stick to English; it is the only language that caters for all African people;*
- *All (languages) are important, but English is better for science;*
- *Encourage students to use English even outside class;*
- *After academic (studies), students go to foreign countries where they need English.*

Those students who presented a more positive attitude towards African languages made statements like:

- *If you use one African language, then you discriminate because there are many;*
- *Every language is good if used purposely and relevantly;*
- *(The) language spoken by pupils in the area (is better than other African languages);*
- *Every learner should use her/ his own language. Educationists should use all languages;*
- *No language is better than the other. African languages must be developed;*
- *Teaching in L1 makes child happier and socially acceptable;*
- *All African languages are better if they make pupils understand;*
- *Only when that African language is well-developed (will it be better in the classroom), African languages should be developed.*

Since the literature suggests that there are definite statuses for different African languages, students' reluctance to express a preference for a particular African language could be the result of the current political climate and the new constitution that have created a particular mindset in which it is undesirable to discuss the existence of different language statuses. Teachers therefore seem very careful not to place one African language above the other.

We argued that the school students' willingness to choose certain African languages above others could be ascribed to their youthfulness and the fact that they may not have been socialised in dominant political thinking on this topic to the extent that older, practising teachers were. The latter, on the other hand, may have thought more about this issue and may also be more wary of

academics with questionnaires. In the light of our results with these two groups, that can be seen as opposite ends of a continuum, we wanted to find out to what extent prospective teachers would be willing to give information about the status of African languages. These teacher trainees (fourth year education students at the Mamelodi Campus of Vista University) were asked to rank 10 Southern African languages in order of suitability as a language of instruction⁶. (Afrikaans and English were excluded because they are already used as languages of teaching and learning.) Students were asked: *If there could be only one African language of instruction, how would you rank the following languages from the most (number 1) to the least suitable (number 9)?* (See Table 4.)

Table 4

Total*(N=63)

Language	1 st	2 nd	3 rd	4 th	5 th	6 th	7 th	8 th	9 th	
Zulu	22	16	4	12	3	2	2	1	0	62
Tswana	18	9	11	11	7	1	4	0	2	63
Pedi	15	12	11	11	3	3	4	2	2	63
Sotho	5	18	16	4	6	4	2	4	4	63
Swati	2	1	2	3	5	9	14	17	8	61
Ndebele	1	1	6	7	16	7	8	7	8	61
Tsonga	1	0	4	4	6	19	3	13	12	62
Xhosa	0	5	9	6	9	7	13	8	5	62
Venda	0	0	0	3	6	11	11	10	21	62

*Some respondents did not provide rankings for all the languages.

These results confirm (to some extent) the information provided by the school students:

- From the numbers above it is clear that Zulu is not an overwhelming first, but it is an overwhelming first and second combination.
- Tswana and Pedi are not surprising seconds. These students are from the same region as the school students.
- Venda and Tsonga are again in the lowest position.
- Ndebele is noteworthy for being the overwhelming middle choice.
- Not one of the Xhosa speakers in the class chose it for her/ his first choice.

The languages were listed as they are generally referred to in documents on South Africa's official languages. Despite the fact that the respondents are Mamelodi-based students (which may explain why 23 of them ranked Sotho as first and second preference) this category is open to speculation. The problematical nature of these language categories has been pointed out by Slabbert and Finlayson, who point out that the Constitution, by the legacy of Apartheid, endorses nine African language categories, implying "that black South Africans operate in nine separate African language groups" (2000: 133). It would be wrong to assume that the students we polled all had the same idea of what is generally considered to be distinctions among Sotho, Pedi and Tswana. They may even have had Pretoria Sotho in mind when they chose the category 'Sotho'.

Another reason why prospective teachers were willing to give us this information while practising teachers were not, could be the way in which the questionnaires were distributed. In the

6. We'd like to thank Ms Sharon Gordon for sacrificing her lecture and time to have students answer the question.

case of the practising teachers, the questionnaire was sent out and returned by post. In the case of the prospective teachers, a very popular lecturer asked them to complete the questionnaire at the end of a lecture. It could be that students were more forthcoming with her, or less willing to resist the question in her presence.

Discussion and conclusions

In our discussions with teachers they explained that they do not switch to the 'pure' form of Sotho because of its connotation with 'rustic' or unsophisticated people. Some teachers call the urban variety 'street language' or even 'Mamelodi'. The Zulu that was used in classes is not the standard form either, because the learners would not understand that (according to the teacher). It seems clear that teachers are aware of the kind of language that they speak, and the fact that one teacher switches to Zulu seems to be less an effort to help Zulu-speaking learners (there are very few of them) than an acknowledgement of the covert prestige of a localised form of an urban variety of Zulu.

The implications of students' information regarding the status of African languages and the covert prestige of urban, localised varieties, are ambiguous. A pessimistic view is that, because teachers are not always willing to share information about their perceptions of African languages, *status* now becomes *covert prestige*, in the sense that the status is hidden behind a kind of political correctness which might prevent acknowledgement of the influence such covert prestige might have on language planning and language teaching methodology.

It also seems as if a second linguistic layer is introduced in classroom communication: students are taught in English and another African language that may not be their home language. Code switching to improve comprehension of difficult subject matter may, in fact, complicate the situation. The fact that an 'unofficial' variety is used in the classroom implies that the standard is not 'developed' in the conventional sense of the word. Teachers and students use a very fluid (and therefore marginal?) code in a marginal way (code switching) in the classroom.

A more optimistic view is that code switching between English and a local, urbanised variety cannot harm the learning process of students. Gani-Ikilama (1990) argues that Nigerian Pidgin has its place as a language of learning and teaching in education, because, in true constructivist fashion, it builds on the familiar. The use of an urban variety may also bring teacher and students closer together and improve the chances of negotiating for meaning. This use does not preclude the development of competence in either English or another standardised language. The biggest advantage of the covert prestige of local, urban varieties may be that they promote active participation and negotiation of meaning in the class. However, the use of code switching as a didactic tool in such circumstances requires more reflection and further research.

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