

Abstract

Individual multilingualism in a multilingual society is often associated with a mass education system. The Kenyan situation illustrates the intertwined complexity of the pedagogical and socialising aspects of language contact in such a system. Using ethnographic observation of classroom interaction in three primary schools, determinants of teachers' language choice and codeswitching among English, Swahili, and mother-tongue are explored: official school policy, cognitive concerns, classroom management concerns, values and attitudes about societal multilingualism. Analogously to monolingual modality switching, codeswitching between languages often provides a resource to focus or regain students' attention, *or*, to clarify, enhance, or reinforce lesson material. Instructional demands and inconsistent patterns of use, however, may also lead to linguistic insecurity and the mislabelling of content or conceptual problems as language competency problems. Understanding the complex role of language, and how teachers informally provide models for behavior and attitudes in the context of formal instruction is important for educational policy.