UTILIZATION OF INTERLANGUAGE STRATEGIES BY MULTILINGUAL LEARNERS IN NURSERY SCHOOL CLASSROOM IN KENYA

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ABSTRACT
The Kenyan linguistic context is highly multilingual with over forty mother tongues. Thus, a majority of Kenyans are multilingual. As such, children from multilingual settings such as Nakuru municipality join school when they are already multilingual and are introduced to English that is used as the medium of instruction and communication. This is particularly the case in private schools. Limited ability in the language hinders the learners from effective participation in classroom discourse. Therefore, the present study investigates the question of how young nursery school children manage to learn English and use it for learning other subjects at the same time. It is based on the hypothesis that the learners with the help of their teachers do utilize various communication strategies to overcome the problem. Further, few studies have been conducted on language learning and use in nursery schools. The theoretical framework was based on the Initiation Response Feedback (IRF) model of classroom discourse under the wider framework of Conversational Analysis (CA) approach, supplemented by the Interlanguage and Communication theories. The study employed a cross-sectional research design and was conducted at the ACK nursery school in Nakuru Municipality. Purposive and cluster sampling methods were used to select one private nursery school, with an accessible population of 52 that included 49 learners, two teachers and a head teacher. Data was collected by use of naturalistic observation method supplemented by audio and video taping. An interview schedule and observation notes were also used to collect corroborative information. Data was analyzed by the use of Discourse Analysis, supplemented by descriptive statistics, and then presented in form of tables, figures and excerpts of transcripts (as examples). The findings revealed that the learners and teachers used three different categories of languages for various purposes in the classroom. The languages included English which was used as the main medium of instruction and communication, Kiswahili supplemented English while the use of mother tongues remained marginal. The learners attempted to overcome the difficulty of communicating in English by mainly switching to Kiswahili and occasionally from one of the languages to the other, often
with the assistance of teachers. In this respect, code switching served as a communication strategy. It is hoped that the Ministry of Education will use the findings of this study to put in place policies that enhance classroom communication for effective learning and development of Early Childhood Education. In addition, the findings will provide insights to the existing body of knowledge in Discourse Analysis, Sociolinguistics and Applied Linguistics.

**Key Words:** Interlanguage Strategies, Multilingual Learners, Nursery School Classroom, Kenya

**Introduction**

A majority of Kenyans are multilingual since the country is highly lingua-pluralistic with over forty languages, Kiswahili as the social lingua franca and English as the official language as reported by Whiteley (1974). This is because they interact in many sectors such as residential areas, educational and health institutions, market and places of worship. Hence, their speech is characterized by a lot of code switching. The multilingual linguistic factor in the country made it necessary to formulate a language policy especially to guide the medium of instruction in schools.

In this respect, Gachathi (1976) recommended that the predominant language of the school ‘catchment’ area be used as the medium of instruction. However, KIE (2002) reported that some private schools and parents evade the policy by insisting on the use of English as the medium of instruction. This is due to the perceived benefits and prestige of English as an international language. Thus after joining nursery school, the learners are introduced to English as a subject and language of instruction. This hinders them from participating effectively in classroom interaction due to limited ability in English. This scenario concurs with the argument by Ellis (1985) that the IRF structure of classroom discourse limits the learners from using their interlanguage thus hindering them from participating in the discourse. In this regard, Bialystok (1990) argues that an investigation into how young learners with a limited ability use a second language involves an examination of communication strategies.

Nevertheless, Ellis (1985) argues that learners should be allowed to use their interlanguage to enable them participate in classroom discourse. Similarly, Mercer (1995) argues that learners should seize the opportunity to participate in the discourse by filling in the slots in the IRF framework. Further, Mercer argues that teachers help learners to develop their knowledge and understanding and also control their behaviour through what he and Bialystok (1990) call guided and communication strategies respectively. In the same respect, Selinker (1972) argues that learners utilize various interlanguage strategies in an attempt to learn and use a second language to communicate. It against this background that the present study sought to identify and examine the interlanguage strategies the learners use in an attempt to overcome the difficulty of using a language they have little ability in.
The findings revealed that the discourse in the learners’ class was characteristic of Sinclair and Coulthard’s (1975) IRF model. Further, the study established that the learners used various interlanguage strategies that helped them to participate in the discourse by filling in the slots in the IRF framework. The strategies were identified through Sinclair and Coulthard’s model under the wider framework of conversational analysis, by establishing the IL strategies used in each exchange. The implications of the use of the strategies were examined through the use of discourse analysis that provides for qualitative analysis of discourse.

Statement of the Problem

Limited ability in English language hinders multilingual nursery school learners from effective participation in classroom communication. However, the strategies employed by the learners to learn English and use it to learn the content of other subjects have not been clearly established.

Objective of the Study

The general aim of the study was to examine the interlanguage strategies that multilingual nursery school learners use to learn and use English in the classroom.

Specific Objectives of the Study

1. To identify the different categories of interlanguage strategies multilingual learners use in a nursery school classroom.
2. To examine the implications of the use of the different interlanguage strategies by multilingual nursery school learners in the classroom.
3. To make recommendations on how the learners can be assisted to develop their interlanguage to acquire competence in English.

Hypotheses

1. Learners use different categories of interlanguage strategies in a nursery school classroom.
2. The use of different interlanguage strategies in the nursery school classroom has implications on classroom communication.
3. Several measures can be put in place to assist learners develop their IL to help them acquire competence in English.

Literature Review

The review involves highlights mainly of the interlanguage strategies, conversational analysis, the IRF classroom discourse model and the communication theory.
Conversational Analysis Approach to Discourse Analysis

Fairclough (1992) claims that CA was developed by a group of sociologists (Garfinkel1967; Benson & Hughes 1983) who called themselves ‘ethnomethodologists’ and attempts to interpret conversation. Conversation analysts are interested in the conversation and the methods conversationalists use for producing and interpreting it. They concentrate mainly on informal conversations between equals such as telephone conversation.

CA helped this study in the analysis of communication strategies by providing a tool for identification and analysis of the different turns, which the study refers to as exchanges. However, the study narrowed down to the IRF classroom model (a form of CA) and analyzed the different turns in classroom conversations for the identification and analysis of communication strategies, and particularly the interlanguage type. The model was chosen because it is classroom specific and deals with teachers and learners: participants of unequal power relationship. A review of the Sinclair and Coulthard’s (1975) model of classroom discourse and the different IL strategies is forthwith presented.

Sinclair and Coulthard’s (1975) IRF Classroom Model

Sinclair and Coulthard’s (1975) model of classroom discourse was derived from the findings of a research project that had set out to examine the linguistic aspects of teacher-pupils interaction. According to the IRF model, the role of the teachers and the strategies they employ are best captured by the three-phase discourse (IRF), which is prevalent in teacher-oriented classrooms (Sinclair & Coulthard, 1975). IRF refers to the exchanges that occur in both language and subject lessons where the teacher takes control of the lesson content and management (Ellis, 1985). Ellis observes that the IRF exchanges are associated with the mode of transmitting education, in which the teacher seeks to impart the knowledge he or she possesses and to reinforce his or her role as the controller of all classroom behaviour. Sinclair and Coulthard further argue that an analysis of such a discourse requires an observation of the subjects in their natural setting as was the case with the study, which employed naturalistic observation as one of the data collection method.

The IRF model consists of sequences of hierarchically related units, analogous to units in sentence grammar. The hierarchy is one of inclusion whereby a larger unit consists of smaller units until the elements can no longer be broken into smaller units. The acts are the units at the lowest rank of discourse followed by the moves, the exchanges, transactions and the lesson at the highest rank in the structure. However, the present study was interested in exchanges that were considered as strategies and in which the others were embedded.

The IRF model has been employed by several scholars to analyse different kinds of discourse. Fairclough (1992) uses the model as a framework to analyse discourses of different types such as telephone conversation. In the same respect, Juma (1991) used the model to describe the structure of classroom discourse in secondary schools in Nairobi. Further, Mercer (1995)
adapted, further advanced and used it to develop what he calls classroom guided talk strategies. He examined the interaction between learners and their teachers in a classroom setting, and gives further insights to classroom discourse.

The review on the CA approach and Sinclair and Coulthard’s (1975) IRF classroom model helped the present study in analyzing the conversations between the learners and their teachers, identifying the IRF exchanges, in which the IL strategies are embedded. The study observed that although the learners are limited by the IRF framework of the discourse in their classroom, the teachers guided them to participate by allowing them to use their IL, through utilization of the IL strategies among others. In this respect, Mercer recommends an examination of the communication process that is involved in learner-pupil interaction in the classroom. This called for brief review of Gumperz’s (1982) communication theory that explains the social aspect of the discourse and the aspect of the communication process in general.

The Communication Theory

Anthropologist Gumperz (1982) developed a theory of communication that provides a framework for analysis of language in interpersonal communication. The theory explains the effect of the interrelationship between culture, society, language and the self as the external factors affecting communication. One of the major tenets of this theory is contextualization cues, which is related to two other concepts: contextual presupposition and situated inference. Gumperz argues that the cues provide presuppositions which are important to the accurate understanding (inferencing) of what is meant. Further, Gumperz (1982) argues that what we perceive and retain in our mind is culturally predisposed. For instance, in modern urban societies people from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds come into contact. He argues that one of the effects of these contacts is communicative difficulty caused largely by people’s culturally bound perceptions of similarities and differences.

Gumperz (1982) defines the cues as any choices of verbal or non-verbal forms of interaction, which include the choice of grammatical aspects such as lexical, phonetic and syntactic options. Other kinds of contextualization cues include paralinguistic features such as intonation, stress and speech rhythm. He further claims that in multilingual contexts, code switching and mixing generate presuppositions by which meaning in a particular context is decoded or inferred. Gumperz further claims that speakers may also use non-verbal strategies such as mimes and facial expressions. In addition, Schiffrin (1994) argues that access rituals such as greetings create and signal access to deep involvement in an interaction thus providing contextualization cues.

Thus, the communication theory assisted this study in the analysis of the classroom as a social context, and the discourse as communication process. The theory also helped the study in the identification and analysis of IL strategies some of which overlapped with discourse strategies, which were mainly realized through the contextualization cues.
The Interlanguage Strategies

The term Interlanguage (thereafter IL) was first coined by Selinker (1972). As Ellis (1985) argues this is the concept on which the IL theory has become significant for empirical research in both the nature of L2 errors and explaining the sequence of development in Second Language Acquisition (thereafter SLA). Ellis further argues that the term IL refers to “the ‘series’ of interlocking systems which form what Corder (1967) refers to as the learner’s ‘built in syllabus’ (that is the interlanguage continuum) (Ellis 1985:47).

Further, IL is considered a strategy of learning and using a second language (thereafter SL) and is depicted through deviations from the TL, which Corder (1967) refers to as errors. Previous studies involving Error Analysis (EA) indicate that language acquisition (both for LI and L2) is a developmental process that progresses in stages on the IL continuum. The IL is intermediate on the continuum with the L1 and the TL on the extreme ends. The errors made by learners are a reflection of the strategies and the processes involved (Corder 1967, Kimani 1987). These processes are considered as strategies through which learners reduce the learning burden otherwise known as simplification (Ellis 1985).

The IL theory posits that there is a psychological structure latent in the brain, which is activated when one attempts to learn an L2 (Selinker, 1972). Selinker argues that the utterances produced by the learner are different from those native speakers would produce to convey the same meaning. Further, Selinker argues that to explain SLA, IL theory addresses three important issues: the processes involved and responsible for IL construction, the nature of the IL continuum and an explanation of the fact that learners do not achieve the full L2 competence.

In the same respect, Ellis (1985) explains the assumptions underlying the IL theory. One is that at any given time, the IL is distinct from L1 and L2. The second is that the approximate system forms an evolving series. Thirdly, in a contact situation, the approximate systems of learners at the same stage of proficiency roughly coincide. The other concept in the IL theory is hypothesis-testing. This concept was used to explain how the L2 learner progressed along the IL continuum. The progress occurs in much the same way as for L1 acquisition. Corder (1967) further points out that some of the strategies used by L2 learners were the same as those by which L1 acquisition takes place. Corder argues that both L1 and L2 learners make errors in order to test out certain hypotheses about the nature of the language they are learning. Thus, he considers errors as a strategy of learner internal processing. Corder further explains that learners formulate hypotheses about the TL rules while they get the input. Hypotheses are accepted if the learners are able to communicate without any problems and misunderstandings. They are rejected if “their output fails to communicate and is corrected” (Ellis, 1994:352 in Sciaga, 2009).

Further, Selinker (1972) expounds the theory by identifying five cognitive processes that operate in the IL and are responsible for SLA. These processes include language transfer: the term was used as an alternative term to the notion of L1 interference. Ellis (1985) explains that L1
interference was a mentalist notion that could not account for behavioral learning. Other processes include overgeneralization of TL rules, transfer of training (that is, a rule enters the learner’s system as a result of instruction), strategies of L2 learning (that is, an identifiable approach by the learner to learn the material to be learned); and strategies of L2 communication (that is, an identifiable approach by the learner to communicate with native speakers). Ellis claims that, these five processes are ways in which the learner tries to internalize the L2 system. They are also the means by which the learner tries to reduce the learning burden to manageable proportions. Ellis further argues that this process is also referred to as ‘simplification’, through which learners reduce the number of hypotheses they test at any one point in time.

In the same respect, Mason (2002) further argues that the learner’s language should be understood as a system in its own right. He claims that it is both possible and interesting because learners tend to go through a series of interlanguages in systematic and predictable ways. This would involve trying to understand how the learner creates his/her IL. Selinker (1972) referred to the five basic processes involved in development of the IL strategies. Mason observes that, Selinker in his later work insists upon learning strategies “that is, activities that the learner adopts in order to help him/her acquire the language”. These strategies include:

**Language Transfer:** This strategy involves the learner’s use of his own LI as a resource. Mostly, this is looked upon as a mistake, but it is now recognized that all learners fall back on their mother tongues. This particularly occurs in the early stages of language acquisition and it is a necessary process. Language transfer can have different effects: negative or positive transfer.

The notion negative transfer was prevalent before the morpheme studies of Dulay and Burt (1974). Researchers often assumed that most errors were derived from transfer of the LI to the L2 and was therefore negatively referred to as interference (Ellis 1985). Dulay and Burt believe that the majority of errors are not based on transfer. However, as Mason (2011) argues it is not always simple to determine whether an error is L1 based or not. For example, when a French speaker uses ‘have-en’ forms in inappropriate settings, it is not easy to tell whether the error is a result of overgeneralization, developmental or interference based. Also, it is not always easy to decide whether an error has occurred.

Further, Mason (2002) argues for positive transfer and observes that not all effects of language transfer are negative. He argues that without language transfer, there would be no SL learning. It is very difficult to learn a language after eleven or twelve years of age, unless one already has a mother tongue to fall back on. “Younger children are able to pick up an L2 without reference to their L1, but for adolescents and adults, the mother tongue is a major resource for language learning”. It has been noted that there is positive transfer where languages are historically and linguistically related to each other. For example, French-speaking learners of English and English-French learners of French quickly come to realize that they share an enormous amount of vocabulary. In the same respect, Japanese speakers learning Chinese find it easy when it
comes to studying the written language because the Japanese ideographs are based upon the Chinese. Thus, this saves them considerable time.

According to Mason (2002), SLA theorists have adopted Chomskian perspective and believe that there are deeper levels at which the L1 may aid in language learning. They argue that, if all languages are fundamentally the same, then it is right to use the rules of the mother tongue as initial hypotheses about the rules of the L2. Thus, the teacher who tries to discourage or forbid his/her students from having recourse to their L1 may be doing them a disservice. They argue that the L1 can be extremely helpful in learning the L2. This study did not attempt to distinguish between negative and positive language transfer strategies.

**Avoidance:** Avoidance is said to occur when a student avoids using certain structures of the L2 that are very different from the L1. However, Bialystok (1990) points out that it is difficult to establish when an L2 learner uses the avoidance strategy. In this regard, Mason (2002) gives an example where Schachter (1974) found that Chinese and Japanese learners of L2 English made less errors in the use of the relative clause than did Persian and Arabic learners. This is because they avoided using them. Schachter observes that this is because Persian and Arabic relative clauses are structured in a similar way to English ones, while the two oriental languages treat them in a very different way.

However, it is difficult to know when a student is using avoidance as a strategy. He must show some evidence that he knows the structure that he is avoiding. Also, it must be such that a normal speaker of the TL would have used the structure in that situation. Kellerman in Mason (2002) distinguishes three types of avoidance: learners can anticipate that there is a problem and have some idea of what the correct form is like. At other times, they may know the target form well but find it difficult to use it in given circumstances, for insurance, a free-flowing conversation. Also sometimes learners know the target form well but will not do so because it breaks a personal rule of behaviour. For example, ready use of the French ‘tu’ form by a person coming from a culture where formality is highly valued.

**Overgeneralization:** Overgeneralization occurs when a learner uses an L2 rule in situations, in which a native speaker would not (Selinker, 1972; Ellis, 1985). Overgeneralization can occur at a number of levels including the phonetic level. For example, after having learnt to master the English ‘r’, a learner may take to placing it at the end of words where in Received Pronunciation (thereafter RP) it is not pronounced. At the grammatical level, for instance, a learner in the early stages may entirely use the present tense. Later, there may be extensive non-native use of ‘be’+ ‘ing’ forms of the verb. At the lexical level, learners tend to use base terms and to stretch them. Thus, a learner might to refer to ‘goose’ as a ‘chicken’ or a teaspoon as a ‘little spoon’. Overgeneralization might also occur at the level of discourse. In this case, lexical items and expressions may be used in inappropriate social contexts. For example, someone learning French as an L2 and who has been staying with a friendly family with teenagers may use the form ‘tu’ to strangers.
**Simplification:** Simplification can be both syntactic and semantic. A learner uses speech that resembles that of very young children or pidgins. This may be either because they cannot in fact, as yet produce the target forms, or because they do not feel sure of them.

**Overuse:** Overuse may be a concomitant of avoidance. In this regard, learners tend to use the forms they know rather than try out the ones they are not sure of. This may also reflect cultural differences. Olshtain in Sciaga (2009) found out that American college students, learning Hebrew in Israel were more likely to use direct expression of apology than were native speakers. This also seems to be true of English speakers of French.

In conclusion, Sciaga (2009) observes that IL is a constantly developing theory that changes its face in the light of new facts. In the same respect, Ellis (1985) points out that the IL theory is based on ‘behavioural events’. Selinker (1972) acknowledges this claim and observes that, the behavioural events that have aroused the greatest interest in SLA have been errors. However, Ellis further observes that, unlike Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis (CAH) which was only used to predict errors, the IL theory attempts to explain them. Thus, the IL theory was closely associated with Error Analysis (EA). Further, EA served as the main device for examining the processes of IL. As such, EA had a bearing on this study in that errors in this study are viewed as communication strategies by which learners learn and use English at the same time. A consideration of the errors assisted the study in identifying and explaining the learners’ IL and the related communication strategies. However, analysis of the strategies did not involve the processes of EA but rather employed DA.

The IL theory assisted the study in identifying the learners’ IL and the strategies that are manifested in their as errors. The errors correspond to the processes identified by Selinker (1972) as operating in IL, and which he refers to as strategies of communication. Unlike the reviewed studies on strategies, this study involved very young bilingual learners who are learning English and at the same time using it for learning other subjects. Thus, the focus was on the process rather than the structure of discourse with particular attention on the strategies employed to sustain communication in the classroom.

**Theoretical Framework**

This study was guided by the IL theory as propounded by Selinker (1972) it was supplemented by the IRF model of classroom discourse by Sinclair and Coulthard (1975) under the wider framework of CA as advanced by (Garfinkel 1967; Benson & Hughes 1983) who are cited by Fairclough (1992). It was further supplemented by the communication theory by Gumperz (1982).

**The IL Theory**

The IL theory posits that the learner keeps on adjusting the rules through ‘hypotheses-testing’ in the acquisition of both L1 and L2, during which he/she engages in various processes, which
Selinker (1972) refers to as strategies. These strategies are manifested through processes such as language transfer, overgeneralization, transfer of training, paraphrase, spelling pronunciation and hypercorrection among others. On the contrary, Corder (1967) refers to the processes as errors. He defines the errors as deviations from the TL, and a strategy for language learning and use. In this respect, both Selinker and Corder consider errors as evidence for learner internal processing of language characterized by different processes or what Selinker calls strategies. However, the strategies identified by Selinker (1972) have a weakness of overlapping and so for the purpose of analysis, only the distinct ones were included in the taxonomy (appendix C).

As the theory was used to identify and explain the learners’ language (IL), strategies and the processes involved in producing it, we can say that the IL theory assisted the study in the identification and explanation of errors as communication strategies. Through the use of the IL, learners were assisted to fill in slots in the IRF framework hence enhancing communication. Thus, through the IL theory, it was found that the learners’ IL was at the lower end of the IL continuum thereby explaining the difficulty learners experienced in the learning and use of English. Furthermore, the theory helped the study to make various recommendations on language policy, learning and use. Thus, the three theories helped to identify, and explain the use; and the implications of the different IL communication strategies in the classroom.

The Initiation Response Feedback (IRF) Model

The IRF model is a form of CA as it involves analysis of conversations but those pertaining to the classroom context. The IRF model considers the classroom as a social context in which structured, systematic and organized interaction occurs, guided by very clear rules. The underlying principle of the IRF model is that, the teacher initiates discourse by eliciting information from learners through questions and giving cues (Sinclair and Coulthard 1975). Then, the learners respond to the elicitation and the teacher provides them with feedback. By structure, the model consists of hierarchically related units that comprise lessons, transactions, exchanges, moves and acts arranged from the highest to the lowest. Concurring with Mercer (1995), this study considered the exchanges as strategies in which the IL strategies are embedded.

The major strength of the IRF model is that it provides a systematic organizational structure of analyzing dialogue, and also ways of describing the structures. The model assisted the study in the identification and explanation of IL strategies by analyzing individual exchanges. Further, the model assisted in exploring the functions of the strategies that are identified as acts under the IRF framework.

However, the model and the IL theory lack a social orientation and a framework for interpretation (Fairclough, 1992). Hence, they cannot explain the power factor in the classroom. As such, the communication theory by Gumperz (1982) was employed to cater for this inadequacy.
The Communication Theory

The theory posits that culture, society, language and the self are interrelated factors that affect communication. Gumperz asserts that what we perceive and retain in our minds is culturally predisposed and that an individual expression is a ‘strategy’. He argues that the strategies provide presuppositions that assist speakers to infer meaning. Gumperz refers to the presuppositions as contextualization cues and argues that they provide coherence and cohesion in interpersonal communication. He views the cues as important discourse strategies that relate what is said to the contextual knowledge thus providing an accurate understanding of what is meant. The cues are achieved through features such as code mixing and switching, face saving, speaking for another, mimes, facial expressions; farewells and greetings. Thus, the communication theory assisted this study in the analysis of the classroom as a social context, in which interpersonal communication takes place, with the target of attaining educational as well as other goals. The theory further explains how the learners’ attempt to communicate in English, a language in which they have limited ability. As they the study established, they managed to do this through the use of their IL as they filled in the slots in the IRF framework of the discourse. Thus the theory helped the study in the identification and analysis of IL strategies some of which overlapped with discourse strategies, which were mainly realized through the contextualization cues.

Research Methodology

Nakuru municipality was purposively selected because it is cosmopolitan and therefore multilingual in nature. The target population was all nursery school learners and teachers in private schools with the accessible being those in the third level of nursery school education. They purposively selected because they had been taught and used English for about two and a half years and therefore likely to display their IL. The sample therefore consisted of two classes of 49 third level learners, two teachers and a head teacher. The data used was collected by the use of naturalistic observation method supplemented by audio and video recording of lessons, an interview schedule and observation notes. It consisted of mainly transcripts of the audio and video tapes, responses from the interviews and observation notes. The data was analyzed through discourse analysis by the use of the IRF model under the framework of CA and supplemented by descriptive statistics. The analysis involved the identification, description and an examination of the implications of the use of IL strategies by the learners.

Results and Discussion

Learner IL Strategies

The IL strategies included language transfer, overgeneralization, hypercorrection, holophrase learning and spelling pronunciation. Findings revealed that English was an L2 for the learners, the medium of instruction that they were learning and using at the same time. In this respect,
Bialystok (1990) argues that all the strategies that L2 learners employ should be considered of a communication type. This claim was confirmed as it was rather difficult to draw a boundary between, for instance, communication and learning strategies. As such, all the strategies that the learners and teachers used were considered of a communication type.

It was further observed that the IL strategies were manifested in form of what Corder (1967) and Ellis (1985) respectively call ‘errors’ and ‘behavioral events’. Ellis argues that to understand the SLA process, errors should be analyzed through trying to explain them by establishing which of the five processes described by Selinker (1972) is responsible for each. In concurrence with Ellis’ argument, the position of this study is that errors are actually not hindrances to learning and use of a language. They were found to be strategies of communication. However, the study employed DA rather than EA in the analysis of the strategies. The study used the term strategy rather than ‘errors’ as the latter has a negative connotation, which according to Ellis implies ‘interference’. Further, the study established that some of the strategies were not manifested as what Corder calls errors but rather to what Selinker calls strategies.

In this respect, Selinker (1972) identified nine types of errors which correspond to his nine types of learning processes. He refers to the processes as strategies that correspond to the IL strategies identified in the study as follows:

**Avoidance**

It was difficult to analyze the avoidance strategy. This was attributed to the fact that the learners seldom made spontaneous speech except in few occasions such as storytelling and news telling. This scenario could be explained by the argument Ellis (1985) that the IRF structure of classroom discourse actually limits learners from using their IL. As far as the use of IL strategies was concerned, it was difficult to establish whether the learners were simply avoiding the TL structures that they found difficult or that they didn’t know at all. This case was also pointed out by Bialystok (1990), who claimed that it was difficult to establish when the learners employ avoidance as a communication strategy. Further, it was observed that the learners appeared to be limited in their ability to use English particularly in the classroom situation. In such a case, they resorted to the use of Kiswahili.

**Language Transfer**

Language transfer strategy, what Gumperz (1982) calls code switching, was the most widely used discourse strategy by teachers at 15.6 percent compared to learners’ 7.0 percent. This disparity was attributed to the observation that teachers were the controllers of the discourse and thus could code switch at will while the learners were constrained. This finding confirms a claim by Ellis (1985) and Kitetu (1988) that teachers control discourse and essentially all classroom events.
In the study, the term code is used interchangeably with language transfer. As such, code switching refers to any instance when a speaker changed from one language to the other. The study did not attempt to distinguish between code mixing and switching; but worked with the argument by Baker (1993) that there cannot be a clear cut distinction between the two and thus uses the term code switching for both. In respect to this argument, it was observed that code switching occurred mainly between English and Kiswahili and on rare occasions to mother tongues namely Kikuyu and Kalenjin.

Further, it was observed that code switching among teachers and the learners was determined by a number of factors. As identified by Romaine (1989) some of these factors include familiarity of the interlocutors, atmosphere of the setting and the perceived linguistic skills of the listeners. The findings also confirm the argument by Hoffman (1991) that code switching has linguistic properties and important social and power aspects. Also, the teachers usually code switched mainly for teaching purposes. One of the purposes was to explain or emphasize a point that would otherwise have been difficult for the learners to understand.

On the other hand, learners would also switch to express their opinions or feelings even when they wanted to react to a teacher’s comment or directive. For example, in a topic about colours a boy expressed his dislike for colour pink by switching to Kiswahili by saying, ‘Teacher sipendi hiyo colour’. He was supposed to ‘dance’ with the colour. It took the teacher’s insistence to convince him to carry out the activity. Also, responding to a wrong answer given a fellow learner the learners would comment ‘umekosea’ (which means ‘you are wrong’). Also, when learners considered an answer wrong, they pushed for the right to give the correct answer. They did so most of times by violating the requirement to bid to be selected by the teacher. The learners switched to Kiswahili by adding a Kiswahili prefix to an English word, for example, “amewrong” meaning “he/she is wrong”.

It was further observed that this style of coining words was an acceptable way of creating new words to communicate an idea. Perhaps the learners used such condensed expressions because they were unable to express themselves in English spontaneously. In the same regard, the teacher used terms such as ‘ataright’ meaning ‘he/she will get it right’ for the reason of expressing solidarity with the students as well cross distance as Baker (1993) argues. This is what Bialystok (1990) calls paraphrasing and specifically word coinage, whereby the speaker creates a new word altogether. However, this is a departure from Bialystok’s definition because the new word is a combination of two languages. For instance, the underlined words in the following example support this finding.

Example 1: Paraphrase in Kiswahili

| T: | Haya angalieni vile (Ok, look at what) (name of learner) is doing). |
| PS: | (Some) No! No! No! |
| T: | Hey! Winifred! |
This kind of word derivations can be attributed to the influence of ‘Sheng’, a slang used in Kenya. It is a combination of mainly English and Kiswahili and is popular among the youth and so dynamic that it is highly unstable even to be studied. It was also noted that the teacher who allowed and used this language was young aged between 20 to 25 years. Further, in example 38, the learners ‘fought’ for the right of commenting on the answers during a Mathematics lesson exercise. When the nominee gave the wrong answer, they switched to Kiswahili to express the fact. Furthermore, learners used code switching with cues from the teacher in informal occasions such as meal times. For example, during meals, the teacher guided the learners on the acceptable table manners by giving them directions in both English and Kiswahili. The teacher would allow the learners to use Kiswahili. She succeeded in organizing them to take their tea in the expected order. When she reprimanded them for not keeping order, the use of Kiswahili allowed her to maintain politeness, without violating solidarity or their negative face. Thus the teacher was able to maintain rapport with the learners. This finding confirms Brown and Levinson’s (1987) argument that politeness is a factor that enhances the positive face and hence helps to sustain communication in discourse. It was further noted that learners would push for intervention by the teacher when they felt their rights were violated by others. They would switch to Kiswahili most of the time or use English to appeal for assistance from the teacher. They recognized that the teacher had the authority and power to assist them. For instance, in the following example, one learner is agitated because he has been pinched by another. He reports him to the teacher and is expecting intervention in his favour. Bialystok (1990) supports this finding by recognizing code switching (what he refers to as language transfer) and appeal for assistance as communication strategies.

Example 2

P: Amenichuna. (He has pinched me).
T: (Ignores him and the pupil insists later on)
P: (Name of learner) ana nini… (is...)
P: Speak English
In example 39, the learner switched to Kiswahili to express himself but the teacher restrained him by insisting he should talk in English. The learner could not proceed from there and hence withdrew the ‘charges’ because he could not express himself in English. Thus, learners used code switching to regulate their own behaviour. When they felt a fellow learner behaved in an undesirable way, they sought the teacher’s intervention by alerting her. They would insist until the teacher who had authority took a measure to correct the situation responded. When the teacher ignored, the learners would get frustrated. Since in such a case the learners would be required to make spontaneous speech, they would only express themselves in Kiswahili. They would not effectively communicate in English because of their limited ability in English. The switch is explained by Selinker (1972) who argues that language transfer is one of the IL processes involved in language learning and use, also known as a strategy.

Furthermore, for the multilingual children involved in the study, mother tongues played a marginal role. However, even when the learners and the teacher switched to mother tongues, they used them sparingly. For instance, the use of the interjection ‘Ngai’ (which in Kikuyu means ‘God!’) to express surprise was known and understood by the whole class. Similarly, the use of the Kikuyu word “mathogothanio” (means illegible writing or a scribble) was understood by learners to mean a wrong answer.

Generally, the findings on language transfer support the claim by Datta (2000) that bilingualism is an asset for the multilingual. The learners and teachers exploited the resource extensively and realized several achievements. Moreover, the strategy facilitated the learners to participate in the classroom discourse by using language transfer, a strategy in their IL. The use of the strategy thus helped the learners in the construction of knowledge; identities and relationships; and regulation of classroom behaviour.

**Overgeneralization**

Selinker (1972) identifies overgeneralization as one of the IL strategies. According to Ellis (1985), this strategy involves the extension of some general use of items not covered by this rule in the TL. This was the view taken in the study. Richards (1974) identifies overgeneralization as one of the strategies associated with developmental or as he calls them ‘intralingual’ errors. Mason (2011) further claims that overgeneralization can occur at phonetic, grammatical, and lexical or discourse levels as the study established. It was further noted that a number of overgeneralization cases related to the use of the article ‘a’ and ‘the’. The learners used ‘a’ indiscriminately with both count and non-count nouns. This was particularly with academic activities specifically news telling and storytelling. However, the use of the article did not mar the intended meaning and the learners still communicated. This case is evidence for the extension of the rule of the ‘article’ use to areas it doesn’t apply as with non-count nouns, as Ellis (1985) argues. However, the learner used the strategy to overcome a communication difficulty. The following example illustrates the use of the article ‘a’ in a bid to tell a story in English.
Example 76

T:  *(Pleadingly and stressing)* Tell us one story. Do you have a story?
P: *(Name of learner)* Story! Story!
PS: *(Respond as expected)* story come!
P: Once upon a time…
PS: Yees!
P: A cat…
PS: Yees
P: … was run to a…
PS: Yeee
P: … to a cat
PS: Yeee
P: A cat tell her I want a milk
T: Mmmh?
P: A rat tall him go and buy a milk. They she went and buy a milk and then she saw a… then she saw a a a… *(hesitates)* then she saw a snake, a snake she saw a rat. A snake tell a rat, go and buy for me cake. Then she went to buy a… *(The ending was not captured).*
T: Oooh! Clap for *(name of learner).*

Moreover, some learners indiscriminately used the article ‘the’ as the following example illustrates.

Example 77

P: *(Story teller)* Rat it a cat. And then it…The cat sleep on the bed, then the cat run to the kitchen and then rat he wake up and the man come and take the cup and then the saw the cup.

It was also observed that a story-telling activity as in Example 77 provided the learners an opportunity to be creative and imaginative. They also got the chance to exercise their oral skills in the TL by attempting to speak fluently and intelligently. This also helped to cultivate the skill of oratory. This skill was also cultivated in the news telling activity where a learner was expected to describe an experience in his or her life. News telling was less like a factual report. It was observed that both storytelling and news telling were effective devices for building confidence in the learners and as such prepared them for public speaking as the following example shows.

Example 78: Indiscriminate use of the article ‘a’

T: Tell us about your father. Stand here. Do you know am going to give you gifts?
Niko na zawadi. Haya come tell us about your father
P: *(Nominee)* My father name is pastor… *(Hesitates and almost losing confidence).* He buy me a biscuit *(pauses)*… and….. *(pauses)* sausage
P: *(Another assists)* a cake.
T: You tell us what he do, what he wear, what he likes. Tell us…….
P: My father’s name is pastor... *(Gives the name).* He buy me a sweet and sausage and *(Pauses)* dolls. Then he buy a shoe and a clothes.

As examples 76, 77 and 78 on the use of the articles indicate, their use allowed the learners to interact with TL. They were able to accomplish the tasks at hand because they were not inhibited in any way or by the teacher to use language as they wished despite the ‘errors’ they made. Thus they accomplished tasks that had educational significance and shared with fellow learners. This finding supports the argument by Kasire (2000) that instruction of and interaction with the TL promoted a learner’s communicative competence. Overgeneralization in terms of grammatical ‘errors’ was also observed in the use of the conjunction ‘and’ at two levels. These include overuse of the conjunction ‘and’ to join nouns into compound nouns, as in example 78. This is a case whereby a competent or native speaker could have done with a list separating the items with a comma to indicate a pause. The use of the conjunction this way is an indication that the learner understands the use the conjunction to express a sense of ‘addition’. Thus he/she can be said to have appropriately used the conjunction to communicate the intended meaning. The other level of the use of ‘and’ was failure to use the conjunction to join clauses into compound sentences. It was further observed that this use of the conjunction ‘and’ consequently caused the grammatical error of repetition. The speaker would pause after every clause and repeat the subject and the verb of every clause. For example, in the following news-telling item the learner is giving an account of his mother, which is dotted with a lot of hesitation and repetitions.

**Example 79: Omission of the conjunction ‘and’**

P: My mother buy me a snack, snacks when am hungry. She is good. She is good.

He buys me *(hesitates)* she buys me.....

T: *(Interrupts)* He or she?

P: *(After hesitation showing uncertainty)* She buys me many things, she buys me uniform, I love my mother *(pauses)* she loves me and she buys me uniform, she buys me shoes, she buys me clothes, she buys me pencil, she buys me panties...

PS: *(Others contribute)* Clothes

P: *(Picks from fellow learners)* clothes

She loves me, she buys me uniform, she buys me pencil, she buys me .....

T: *(With a rising intonation)* everything you want?

P: *(News teller)* Yes

T: *(With rising a intonation)* so she is bad?

P: My mother is good

T: You don’t like him. You don’t like her?

P: I love him

T: Him or her?

P: I love my mother

T: You love her. Haya! Good! Clap for him.
Example 79 also illustrates that the learners had some difficulty using the personal pronouns to distinguish gender. Most of them used ‘he’ and ‘she’ interchangeably to refer to feminine and masculine gender. However, with a cue from the teacher they would quickly correct their mistake. This could mean that they knew the pronouns but have not mastered their functions well to use them in spontaneous speech. However, it also appeared that the learners and sometimes the teachers were not very keen on this issue because after all the learners communicated. Thus overgeneralization was used as a strategy which allowed the learners to freely express themselves.

Furthermore, overgeneralization provided for interaction among the learners and their teachers through news telling and storytelling, during which they could use spontaneous speech. The strategy as such helped learners to describe shared experience thus contributing to the construction of knowledge. It was further observed that in their creativity and imagination the learners related stories about their everyday experiences and things in their surroundings. This finding supports the observations by Mercer (1995) on the significance of describing shared experience in the construction of knowledge in the classroom.

Another form of overgeneralization was the use of preposition ‘with’ by both learners and teacher. For the learner, it appeared to have been caused by lack of mastery of the use of the preposition ‘with’. For example, in a story where the learner made a statement “He had with a dog”, the use of the preposition was ambiguous and appeared to have been used to mean ‘He walked together with his dog’ or ‘He owned a dog’ in the statement. This use of the preposition is compared to the same by the teacher. For the teacher, the ‘misuse’ of the preposition ‘with’ appeared to be rather strategic. She seemed to employ what Ellis (1985) calls ‘teachers talk’ whereby a teacher modifies his/her language to simplify her it to a form that learners could understand. For example, when teaching about utensils and colours she would nominate a learner to identify a utensil and its colour and then ask him/her to ‘dance with the colour’. The learners interpreted the use of the preposition correctly and responded as expected.

Overgeneralization also involved the omission of ‘be + -ing’ form to mark the progressive (continuous) aspect. Instead, the learners resorted to the use of the infinitive without ‘to’. This was a common feature in cases where learners made spontaneous speech mostly unrelated to the IRF framework. For instance, when learners were offended by their fellow learners they would express themselves in English. They would appeal to the teacher for assistance in English; and for her intervention. The learners always used the statement “Teacher (name of offender) disturb me” for all kinds of offences. Probably, they extended the use of the word ‘disturb’ to all offences for lack of appropriate vocabulary hence overgeneralizing its use. When teacher demanded clarification on the kind of offence, they would switch to Kiswahili. For example a learner reported in Kiswahili “Amenichuna” which in English means “He/she has pinched me”.

It was further noted that the accusation by the learners about being offended was also a way of asserting themselves. They constructed identities that shaped the self as a person who cannot
stand anyone being a nuisance to him/her. Also, by doing this the learner was able to create
distance between himself or herself and the offender just as Baker (1983) and Fairclough (1992)
claim. It was further noted that the act of reporting an offender to the teacher contributed in
regulating classroom behaviour which could otherwise have distracted the class. Such a learner
(that is the accuser) managed to alert the teacher who would then take an intervention measure to
control the class.

Further, it was observed that there are some aspects of the language that the learners had not
acquired. They paid little or no attention to grammatical aspects such as gender, concord and
tenses. Further, the learners experienced similar difficulties characterized by hesitation and
pauses even in reading stories. However, the degree of difficulty was lower. This finding
supports Selinker (1972) and Dulay and Burt (1974) who argue that the acquisition of an L2 is
systematic on a continuum and as such developmental. In this respect, the IL of the learners
appeared to be on the lower end of the continuum. Thus, it was observed that there were many
features of the TL which they had not acquired.

The study thus established that overgeneralization was a significant strategy of communication
particularly in enabling the learners to participate in classroom discourse. They did this through
the filling in of slots in the IRF framework, which Mercer (1995) claims is their obligation. It
was also important when the learners were required to make spontaneous speech during
academic lesson. They used their IL as they made efforts to communicate in the TL, by over
generalizing the rules they had already acquired. It was observed that the use of this strategy
facilitated communication in the classroom. This was because even when they made what in
some cases would be considered ‘errors’, the errors did not hinder but rather enhanced
communication as Ellis (1985) claims.

**Holophrase Use**

The study recorded the use of the holophrase at a significant level of 6.3 percent. Selinker (1972)
identifies the use of the holophrase as one of the learning processes involved in the IL. This is
also the position of the study. In the same respect, Tomasello (2000) points out that the
holophrase is a strategy that could be the use of a single word or a simple fixed expression used
by toddlers to express complex ideas. In this regard, the learners can be compared to toddlers
learning their L1. Tomasello further describes a holophrase as a non-grammatical feature which
is simply a ‘vocalization’ memorized by rote and used without grammatical intent. He further
argues that combined with body language, context and tone of voice a holophrase is usually
sufficient to express a child’s needs based on context. The situation described by Tomasello is
actually evident in the study. The description by Selinker (1972) was instrumental in explaining
the use of holophrase by L2 learners as an IL based communication strategy. The study
established that unlike L1 learners who used a single word, the learners in the study used either
single words or chunks of them. It was noted that they had learned those expressions by rote and
used them accordingly. In the classroom, the holophrase could sometimes be accompanied by a
non-verbal expression. In addition, various holophrases were used to fulfill a number of purposes, which overlapped with those of access rituals hence their discussion was combined. The commonest form of holophrase included forms of applause; the prelude to storytelling; forms of bidding, greetings and farewells.

**Spelling Pronunciation and Hypercorrection**

Learners used hypercorrection and spelling pronunciation strategies at 7 percent and 1 percent respectively. The two strategies were discussed together because they intertwined in their use as one occurred as a result of the other. Learners usually employed hypercorrection as a response to a teacher’s intervention after correcting a spelling pronunciation ‘error’. The two are identified by Selinker (1972) as strategies and were manifested as ‘spoken’ errors of the nature Richards (1974) calls ‘intralingual’.

The two strategies were mostly used during academic activities and occasionally in creative activities. The strategies largely featured in the speech drills where learners were expected to read words loudly by repeating after the learner ‘leader’, under the supervision and guidance of the teacher. Most of the times, the strategies occurred with words which have silent letters. They happened to pronounce the words by their spelling including the silent letters. In their eagerness to overcome the difficulty they would sometimes mispronounce the word by overstressing some of the sounds arising to hypercorrection. In such cases, they employed spelling pronunciation as strategy as in following examples: “iron sheets, park, burn, watch, listening, honey, grain and holding”. The teacher would make them repeat it until they got it correct. The following is an example of the use of spelling pronunciation and hypercorrection strategies.

**Example 80**

- **P:** *(Leader has difficulties reading the word ‘listening’)*
  - **PS:** *(Listening)* List… List… List…ening *(Hesitantly)* Listening
  - **T:** *(Has noticed the mistake and wants the learner to repeat reading)*
  - **Ee?**
  - **P:** *(Corrects the mispronunciation)* listening
  - **PS:** *(Take cue and correct the mistake)* Listening
  - **T:** *(Confirming the pronunciation)* Listening
  - **P:** Listening
  - **PS:** Listening

In Example 80, the teacher had diverted to this topic when she realized that the learners had a major difficulty with silent letters. In another instance, she switched to Kiswahili and the topic by remarking “Inaonekana nyinyi mmesahau masounds” (It appears you have forgotten the sounds). She would ask the learners to practice pronouncing more words with silent letters. If they missed the correct pronunciation, she would correct the error and then ask them to repeat.
Sometimes, they would hypercorrect that is by overstressing some of the sounds as following example illustrates.

**Example 81**

T: *(Directs a learner to spell a word)* this girl *(name of learner)*, read that word.

P: *(Struggles to read)* waa…tch waaa…ch

T: Again

P: Waatch

T: Speak up!

P: *(Another pupil bids)* Teacher, teacher

P: *(Ignores the bid)* again.

P: *(Stella corrects the mistake)* watch

T: Eee, lakini unaona mwanzo alikuwa amesoma *(pronouncing the ‘t’)* watch. ‘t’ inafanya nini? (Eee, but it appears at the beginning he had read *(pronouncing the ‘t’)* ‘watch’. ‘t’ is doing what?)

PS: *(Some)* inalala. (It is sleeping)

T: *(Expression ends with a rising intonation)* Inanyamaza, lakini ukiandika inafanya nini? (It sleeps, but when you write it wakes up?)

PS: Inaamuka. (It wakes up)

T: Inaamka. (It wakes up) *(Pauses)* Haya *(Ok)* let’s hear from *(name of learner)*. *(Name of learner)* come and read.

It was further noted that, the strategies also appeared in recreation and creative activities as previously highlighted in the discussion of stress and intonation strategies as example 103 illustrates. Thus, the use of IL strategies enhanced classroom communication in that they provided the learners the opportunity to use their IL. They were embedded in the IRF framework and heavily overlapped with one another and sometimes with discourse strategies.

**Conclusions**

The learners’ use of IL strategies to express themselves in English a language they were learning and using at the same time, allowed them to participate in the filling of slots in the IRF framework as expected. The use of the IL strategies provided them an opportunity to interact with the language and therefore facilitated the development of their IL along the IL continuum. Interaction with the language would help the learners to gradually fully develop their communicative competence. This would hence help the learners to overcome the difficulty communicating in English and facilitate them to learn the content of other subjects more easily since English is the medium of instruction in the school. Effective use of English would thus enhance their academic performance.
Recommendations

Based on the findings of the study, it has been argued that due to limited ability in English, multilingual nursery school learners have difficulty communicating in English; and that the learners’ several languages are a resource rather than a hindrance to communication. Therefore, the following recommendations have been made in respect to enhancing the achievement of goals of the ECD programme: In multilingual contexts, language policy to address multilingualism as a resource not only for learning but also for achieving other social and economic needs. In this respect, the learners’ languages should be recognized and considered for development to meet the different needs of the learners. The learners should be allowed to use their IL in order to enable them to participate in the classroom discourse. Emphasis should be laid on cultivating linguistic competence of the teachers particularly on the language of instruction to avoid errors related to transfer of training. As the findings revealed by the findings, a few of the errors were not strategic but rather a result of linguistic incompetence. Such errors can easily be transferred to the learners thereby affecting the development of their IL and subsequently their acquisition of communicative competence.

References


