



IS 'EVERYBODY' SINGULAR OR PLURAL: THE MISCONCEIVED PRONOUN IN A BILINGUAL CLASSROOM

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Abstract

In bilingual classrooms, the pronoun "everybody" is often misconceived as either singular or plural due to linguistic differences between languages, cultural nuances, and varying grammatical rules. This confusion complicates the acquisition of proper English grammar for non-native speakers. By exploring the singular nature of "everybody" in English, juxtaposed with its plural interpretations in other languages, this paper examined how these misconceptions arise and what pedagogical strategies can be implemented to foster a clearer understanding among bilingual students. Initially, the research focused on well-prepared students from private schools, proficient in English and preparing for standardised tests such as the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT), Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL), Graduate Record Examination (GRE), and Graduate Management Admission Test (GMAT). However, a shift to teaching at a public tertiary institution in a rural area highlighted the significant differences in student preparedness and linguistic background. The students, aiming for technical certifications, often relied on code-switching and code-mixing between their native languages and English to communicate effectively. This study employed these bilingual strategies as a pedagogical tool, particularly in addressing linguistic nuances such as the conceptual differences in pluralisation between Yoruba and English. The findings indicate that incorporating code-switching and code-mixing, explicit instruction, contextual learning, repetition and reinforcement, and multilingual teaching aids are strategies that will facilitate better comprehension but also bridge the gap between students' native linguistic frameworks and the English language. The research underscores the importance of considering sociolinguistic factors, such as students' linguistic backgrounds, social class, and gender, in teaching English as an additional language. Ultimately, this approach emphasizes the need for a communication-focused teaching.

Key Words: Code-mixing, Code-switching, Multilingual, Nigeria, Teaching English as L2

Introduction

Language is a complex system that allows us to communicate with one another. Communication, as stated here, is the exchange or spread of information, message, attitude, moods, or ideals between interlocutors. Akmajian, Demers, Farmer and Harnish (2008) opine that semantic function in human communication is significant to the overall essence of the linguistic composition. These authors see language as dynamic just as culture is. Language is conveyed from one peer group to another; it helps the society to have a feature of continuity and as this innateness of permanence is achieved, language is greatly acquired through exposure to the cultural and social environment rather than by any genetical co-occurrence (Ehuwa, 2005). This, in essence, is what gives rise to language modification.

Accurate pronoun usage is a fundamental aspect of language acquisition, playing a key role in mastering grammatical coherence and communication skills (Lightbown & Spada, 2013). Misunderstanding the function of pronouns like "everybody" can lead to errors in agreement, thereby complicating the learning process for non-native English speakers. In bilingual classrooms, these challenges are amplified by linguistic interference from students' first languages, cultural nuances, and the inherent differences in grammatical rules (Odlin, 1989). Pronouns that are grammatically singular in English may be perceived as plural in other languages, contributing to a complex learning environment where understanding grammatical norms becomes crucial (Ellis, 1997).

In Nigerian bilingual classrooms, English is the official language, but many students also speak indigenous languages like Yoruba, Igbo, and Hausa. Pronoun usage, especially with "everybody," often causes confusion because students tend to interpret it as plural, influenced by the structure of their first languages (L1).

The pronoun "everybody" has long been a subject of grammatical debate in English, particularly regarding whether it should be treated as singular or plural. Grammatically, "everybody" is considered singular, requiring singular verbs and pronouns, yet its meaning conveys a sense of plurality, referring to multiple individuals

(Huddleston & Pullum, 2002). This creates a point of confusion not only for native English speakers but especially for bilingual learners whose first languages may interpret similar pronouns differently (Swan, 2016). In multilingual contexts, particularly in classrooms, this confusion can become more pronounced as students navigate between differing grammatical structures and rules (Gass & Selinker, 2008).

This study explores the specific challenges that bilingual students face in correctly using "everybody" in English. Drawing comparisons between the singular nature of "everybody" in English and its plural interpretations in languages such as Yoruba. It examines how such misconceptions arise. The research began by focusing on students from private schools proficient in English and preparing for standardized tests like the SAT and TOEFL. However, transitioning to teaching at a public tertiary institution in a rural area revealed a stark difference in linguistic backgrounds and preparedness. Many students relied on code-switching and code-mixing between their native languages and English to communicate effectively, a strategy that this research found could be harnessed as a pedagogical tool (Baker, 2011).

By examining these bilingual strategies, this study underscores the importance of addressing linguistic differences in the classroom, especially when it comes to nuances such as pluralization. It also highlights the role of sociolinguistic factors, such as students' social class and linguistic backgrounds, in shaping their language learning experiences (Wardhaugh, 2010). Ultimately, this paper advocates for a communication-focused model that integrates students' primary languages, promoting clearer understanding and more effective language acquisition.

Linguistic Background

The pronoun "everybody" in English, though semantically inclusive of multiple individuals, is grammatically singular. According to English grammar rules, indefinite pronouns like "everybody," "anybody," and "nobody" are treated as singular and thus require singular verbs and pronouns for agreement (Idegbekwe, 2020).

For example, in the sentence “Everybody is ready for the journey,” the verb “is” agrees with “everybody” as a singular subject, despite referring to more than one person. This singular treatment is based on the notion that “everybody” refers to an undifferentiated group considered as a whole rather than as separate entities (Huddleston & Pullum, 2002). While this singularity is firmly rooted in English grammar, it poses challenges for bilingual students whose first languages may treat similar pronouns differently.

The confusion surrounding the singular or plural nature of “everybody” also touches upon the distinction between descriptive and prescriptive grammar. Prescriptive grammar lays down specific rules for how a language should be used, as commonly taught in classrooms. In the case of English, prescriptive rules dictate that “everybody” is always singular and should be treated as such. In formal writing and standardized tests, any deviation from this rule is marked as incorrect (Swan, 2016). Teachers, especially in multilingual or bilingual classrooms, often emphasize prescriptive grammar to ensure students master the standard forms required for academic and professional success.

However, descriptive grammar, which examines how language is used in practice. Descriptive grammar reveals that many native speakers sometimes treat “everybody” as plural in casual speech. For example, one might hear the sentence, “Everybody are bringing their own snacks,” particularly in informal contexts where the speaker intuitively associates “everybody” with the idea of a group (Trudgill, 1999). This pluralization, while incorrect according to prescriptive grammar, reflects a more fluid and natural use of language in everyday communication. In bilingual classrooms, students may lean towards descriptive grammar as they code-switch between languages, further complicating their understanding of the rules (Poplack, 2001).

What is Code-Mixing?

Code-mixing refers to the practice of using two or more languages or language varieties in a single conversation. This phenomenon is common among bilingual or multilingual speakers who

switch between languages depending on the context or the people they are speaking with. Code-mixing can occur at different levels, from individual words and phrases to entire sentences or paragraphs. Code-mixing can serve various functions, such as expressing identity, signaling social status, or conveying emotions. For example, a bilingual speaker may use a word from their first language to express a particular emotion that does not have an equivalent in their second language. Similarly, code-mixing can be a way to assert one's cultural identity or to establish solidarity with a particular group.

What is Code-Switching?

Code-switching is similar to code-mixing in that it involves the use of two or more languages or language varieties in a single conversation. However, code-switching refers specifically to the practice of switching between languages or language varieties at specific points in a conversation. Code-switching can occur at different levels, from individual words and phrases to entire sentences or paragraphs. Code-switching can serve various functions, such as signaling a change in topic, emphasizing a point, or clarifying a concept. For example, a bilingual speaker may switch to their second language when discussing a technical or specialized topic that is more familiar to them in that language. Similarly, code-switching can be a way to establish rapport or to negotiate power dynamics in a conversation.

The Ingenuity of Code-mixing and Code-switching

Code-mixing and code-switching are examples of the ingenuity of language users in adapting to different situations. These linguistic phenomena demonstrate the flexibility and creativity of language in expressing complex ideas and emotions. Code-mixing and code-switching are not errors or deviations from “proper” language use, but rather strategic choices that reflect the speaker's linguistic repertoire and communicative goals. As our world becomes increasingly diverse and interconnected, code-mixing and code-switching are becoming more common and accepted in many contexts. These linguistic

practices enrich our understanding of language and culture and provide a means for people to connect and communicate across linguistic and cultural boundaries.

Code -switching in a Multilingual Teaching Environment

In a multilingual teaching environment, code switching is a common phenomenon that refers to the practice of alternating between two or more languages or language varieties in a single conversation or interaction. This can occur for various reasons, including to accommodate the language needs of students, to clarify concepts, or to establish rapport with students. However, there are many benefits associated with code switching and code mixing in classroom teaching. Code switching can have several benefits in the classroom. Firstly, it can help to create a more inclusive learning environment by accommodating the language needs of students who may be more comfortable in a particular language. This can help to build trust and rapport between teachers and students, which can enhance the learning experience. Secondly, code switching can be used to clarify complex concepts or ideas. By using a student's native language or a language they are more comfortable with, teachers can ensure that students fully understand the concept being taught. This can help to reduce misunderstandings and improve overall learning outcomes. Finally, code switching can help to promote multilingualism and cultural awareness in the classroom. By exposing students to different languages and cultures, teachers can help to broaden their perspectives and foster a greater appreciation for diversity.

Theories of Code Switching and Code Mixing

Several theories have been propounded to explain why and how code-switching and code-mixing occur. One of the most influential theories is the Matrix Language Frame (MLF) model, developed by Carol Myers-Scotton. According to this model, code-switching occurs when a speaker uses one language as the matrix language (ML) and another language as the embedded language (EL). The ML provides the grammatical frame for the sentence, while the EL contributes specific

lexical items (Myers-Scotton, 1993). This model helps explain the structural aspects of code-switching and how one language dominates the syntactic structure of the discourse.

Another important theory is Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT), developed by Howard Giles. This theory suggests that speakers adjust their language use to accommodate their interlocutors. In multilingual contexts, this can lead to code-switching or code-mixing as speakers attempt to establish rapport or align themselves with their conversation partners (Giles, Coupland, & Coupland, 1991). CAT focuses on the social and interactional motivations behind language switching, emphasizing the role of communication goals in shaping linguistic choices.

A third theory is the Bilingual Interactive Activation Plus (BIA+) model, proposed by Guillaume Thierry and colleagues. This model posits that bilinguals have a single mental lexicon that contains representations for both languages. When a bilingual encounters a word in one language, activation spreads to related words in both languages, making it more likely for code-switching or code-mixing to occur (Thierry et al., 2009). The BIA+ model highlights the cognitive processes underlying bilingual language use, particularly how both languages are simultaneously activated in the bilingual brain.

Code-switching and code-mixing are complex linguistic phenomena that have been extensively studied by linguists. Theories such as the Matrix Language Frame model, Communication Accommodation Theory, and Bilingual Interactive Activation Plus model offer valuable insights into how bilinguals use language in multilingual contexts.

Is “Everybody” Singular or Plural? Example of Code Mixing and Code Switching in Classroom Teaching

Code mixing and code switching are linguistic phenomena that are part of everyday communication for many bilingual and multilingual individuals. They occur when speakers switch between two or more languages or language varieties within a single conversational context. Below is a practical

example of code mixing and code switching in classroom teaching in a typical bilingual teaching environment.

As a lecturer in a tertiary institution in Ogun State, Nigeria, in my Communication Skills class to both Higher and Lower National Diploma, code-switching and code-mixing are topics in the curriculum-these are skills for communicating in a bi/multilingual environment. I also came to employ these strategies to teach a concept. For example, in Yoruba, “everybody” is conceptualized as plural, though in English, it is conceptualized as singular. Students will say, “*Gbogbo wa ti wa ni ibiyi*,” meaning “everybody is here” with *gbogbo* meaning *entire*, or *all*. The Yoruba-speaking student will translate this literally as “*everybody are here*.” With the help of using of code-switching and code-mixing as a teaching method, I as the teacher was able to successfully explain the concepts and structures of both languages to the students.

Challenges of Code Switching in the Classroom

While code switching can have many benefits, it can also present some challenges. One challenge is ensuring that all students are able to follow the conversation or instruction when two languages are being used. This can be particularly difficult for students who are not fluent in the two languages being used. Another challenge is maintaining a balance between different languages. Teachers must be careful not to favour one language over another, as this can create feelings of exclusion or bias among students.

Code switching can be a valuable tool in a multilingual teaching environment. It can help to create a more inclusive learning environment, clarify complex concepts, and promote multilingualism and cultural awareness. However, it is important for teachers to be mindful of the challenges associated with code switching and to strive for balance and inclusivity in their teaching practices.

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Language Teaching Strategies in Bilingual Environments

Addressing the confusion around whether “everybody” is singular or plural in bilingual classrooms requires a multifaceted approach that combines explicit instruction, contextual learning, and repetition. These strategies ensure that students not only understand the grammatical rules governing pronoun usage but also internalize these rules across various contexts.

1. **Explicit Instruction:** One of the most effective ways to address the misconception surrounding “everybody” is through explicit grammar instruction. Research has shown that clear, direct explanations of grammatical rules can significantly improve learners' understanding and application of language structures (Ellis, 2006). In the case of “everybody,” it is crucial to explicitly teach that, despite its semantic plurality, it functions grammatically as a singular

pronoun in English. Teachers should emphasize the singular verb agreement that accompanies "everybody" in sentences (e.g., "Everybody is here"), while contrasting it with plural pronouns like "they" or "all" to clarify the distinction.

2. **Contextual Learning:** While explicit instruction lays the foundation, contextual learning helps students apply these rules in real-world communication. Context-based activities such as role-playing, group discussions, and writing exercises allow students to practice using "everybody" in meaningful situations. Studies in second language acquisition emphasize the importance of context in reinforcing grammatical understanding, particularly in bilingual settings where students often transfer grammatical rules from their first language (Lightbown & Spada, 2013). For example, teachers can introduce sentences that require students to choose between singular and plural verbs, prompting them to recognize and apply the correct usage of "everybody" based on the sentence structure.
3. **Repetition and Reinforcement:** Repetition is another essential component in helping students internalize grammatical rules. Frequent practice through drills, quizzes, and in-class exercises reinforces the singular nature of "everybody" in English, making it easier for bilingual learners to adopt this usage in both spoken and written forms (Nation, 2013). Repeated exposure to correct examples, coupled with error correction in real-time, ensures that students gradually overcome their L1 interference and develop a more intuitive understanding of English grammar.
4. **Multilingual Teaching Aids:** In bilingual classrooms, leveraging multilingual teaching aids can also help resolve confusion about pronouns. These aids could include comparative charts that display how pronouns like "everybody" are used in both

the students' first languages and in English as ESL. For example, showing students how "awon" translated as "they" in English which is plural. Conversely, "everybody" which is singular in English can clarify these cross-linguistic differences. Multilingual visual aids, such as posters or infographics, can also help students visualize the rules in a way that integrates their linguistic background with their English learning (Genesee & Lindholm-Leary, 2013).

Additionally, bilingual dictionaries or glossaries that include examples of pronoun usage in both languages can serve as valuable reference tools for students. Teachers can also incorporate multilingual examples during instruction to illustrate how different languages handle similar pronouns, which promotes a deeper understanding of grammatical nuances and reduces errors.

Case Studies and Data Analysis on Pronoun Usage in a Nigerian Bilingual Classroom

This section presents case studies, data analysis, and interviews with educators to explore how these misconceptions arise and strategies for addressing them.

Case Study 1: Pronoun Usage in a Rural Secondary School

Context and Methodology: In a rural secondary school in Ode Remo, Ogun State, Nigeria 50 students were assessed for their understanding of the pronoun "everybody." These students, who are native Yoruba speakers learning English as their second language (L2), participated in the following tasks:

Writing Task: Students wrote five sentences using "everybody."

Speaking Task: Role-playing exercises were conducted where students used pronouns like "everybody."

Error Analysis: The focus was on the verb agreement with the pronoun "everybody."

Findings: Analysis showed that 76% of students incorrectly used a plural verb in their writing (e.g., "Everybody are coming"), and 68% made the same error in speaking tasks. The error stemmed mainly from L1 interference, as in Yoruba, "gbogbo eniyan" (everybody) takes a plural verb, which confuses students when using English.

Data Analysis for Rural School

Task	Number of Students	Correct Usage (%)	Incorrect Usage (%)
Writing Task	50	24%	76%
Speaking Task	50	32%	68%

Case Study 2: Pronoun Usage in an Urban Private School

Context and Methodology: A similar study was conducted in an urban private school in Lagos,

where 40 students with higher exposure to English participated. These students, who spoke English fluently along with Igbo or Yoruba, completed the same writing and speaking tasks.

Findings: Urban students showed better accuracy, with 85% correctly using a singular verb in writing tasks and 78% in speaking tasks. Greater exposure to English and formal grammar instruction seemed to reduce L1 interference.

Data Analysis for Urban School

Task	Number of Students	Correct Usage (%)	Incorrect Usage (%)
Writing Task	40	85%	15%
Speaking Task	40	78%	22%

Statistical Analysis of Pronoun Errors

An aggregated analysis of the 90 students from both rural and urban schools showed the following trends:

Total Error Rate: 55.5% of students incorrectly used a plural verb with "everybody."

Writing vs. Speaking: Errors were more common in writing (40%) than in speaking (32%).

Rural vs. Urban: Rural students had a higher error rate (72%) compared to urban students (18%)

Comparative Error Analysis

Group	Correct Usage (%)	Incorrect Usage (%)
Rural Students	28%	72%
Urban Students	82%	18%

Discussion

This study highlights a recurring challenge in Nigerian bilingual classrooms: the confusion surrounding the pronoun "everybody" as singular or plural. The data from both rural and urban student populations reveal that the influence of indigenous languages significantly affects students' understanding of English pronouns, especially in contexts where grammatical norms differ between English and their first languages (L1). This confusion is most prevalent in classrooms where students have limited exposure to English outside of the academic setting. For instance, in Yoruba and many other Nigerian languages, pronouns similar to "everybody" often function as plural, requiring plural verb agreement. This syntactic difference creates persistent errors as students apply the familiar

grammatical rules of their L1 to English.

The applied linguistics implications of these findings are profound, particularly in the context of second language acquisition (SLA) and bilingual education. First, the findings suggest that L1 interference is a strong factor in shaping L2 (second language) acquisition. As bilingual students learn English, their cognitive framework often defaults to the familiar structures of their L1, which leads to frequent errors. This is supported by studies in applied linguistics that show that grammatical structures in an L1 can strongly influence L2 acquisition, particularly in environments where formal language instruction may be inconsistent or insufficient (Lightbown & Spada, 2013). Consequently, students who do not receive explicit instruction in English grammar—particularly pronoun use and verb

agreement—are more likely to carry these misconceptions forward, affecting their overall proficiency.

Secondly, the prevalence of these errors in rural classrooms, compared to urban ones, underscores the role of socioeconomic factors in English acquisition. Students in rural areas often have fewer resources, such as English language books and exposure to English media, which limits their opportunities for immersion in the target language. This reduced exposure can lead to fossilization, where students repeatedly make the same errors due to insufficient correction or reinforcement of proper usage. The data implies that without targeted interventions to bridge these gaps, students in rural areas may continue to face difficulties with English pronoun usage well into higher education and beyond, impacting their academic and professional opportunities.

An additional applied linguistics implication relates to the importance of explicit and contextualized grammar instruction in bilingual classrooms. Given that “everybody” is semantically plural but grammatically singular in English, students benefit from learning how meaning and grammar interact in English, especially in cases where these functions diverge from their L1. By understanding the specific grammatical rules around “everybody,” students can gradually reduce L1 interference and improve their accuracy in English. This aligns with SLA theories that emphasize the importance of explicit grammar instruction in helping learners acquire difficult or unfamiliar structures (Ellis, 2006).

Recommendations

- 1. Explicit Pronoun Instruction:** Teachers should provide clear, structured instruction on pronoun usage in English, with specific focus on pronouns like “everybody” that exhibit semantic plurality but require singular agreement. Lessons should include direct comparisons to students' L1 to clarify how English pronouns differ.
- 2. Contextual Learning Activities:** Classroom activities should encourage students to use “everybody” in varied contexts. Role-playing exercises, sentence drills, and group discussions can help reinforce the singular grammatical structure in a communicative

setting, reducing L1 interference.

- 3. Use of Multilingual Teaching Aids:** Visual aids that compare English pronoun structures with those in local languages such as Yoruba and Igbo can help students recognize syntactic differences. Examples of correct usage in both languages should be provided, illustrating the singular agreement requirement in English while acknowledging the plural forms in their L1.
- 4. Socioeconomic and Regional Adaptations:** In rural areas, teachers should receive additional training to provide targeted grammatical support, given the higher prevalence of errors. Moreover, investment in English language resources—such as supplementary textbooks and English media—can provide rural students with additional exposure to proper usage.

Conclusion

The data from both case studies indicate that L1 interference plays a significant role in students' incorrect usage of pronouns like “everybody.” Rural students, with less exposure to English and weaker grammar instruction, showed higher error rates compared to urban students. Educators identified explicit instruction, visual aids, and frequent practice as key strategies for improving pronoun usage in English, particularly in bilingual settings.

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