

Domain-based Language Use, Code-switching, and Communication Strategies Among Visually Impaired University of Ilorin Students

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Abstract

This study examines how visually impaired undergraduates at the University of Ilorin, Nigeria, use language. It focuses on 20 visually impaired students aged 16 to 30, from academic levels 100 to 400. The study examines their language choices in different settings, how they switch and mix languages, and how they communicate without visual cues. The research draws on structured oral interviews with twenty visually impaired students. Analysis was grounded in Hymes's Ethnography of Communication and Myers-Scotton's markedness theory. The findings show a clear pattern: English is mainly used in academic settings, while social situations involve a lot of code-mixing with English, local languages, and Nigerian Pidgin. The study reveals that code-switching is a common and intentional practice, mainly used to communicate more precisely rather than because of a lack of vocabulary. The paper argues that visually impaired students are skilled, strategic multilingual communicators.

Keywords: sociolinguistics, code-switching, visual impairment, language use, Nigerian universities, communication strategies

Introduction

Language is the principal medium through which individuals participate in social life, and for people who cannot rely on vision, spoken language assumes an even more central role. It mediates experience, identity, and belonging (Jenkins, 2009). Nigeria's linguistic landscape, with over five hundred indigenous languages alongside English as the official language of instruction, places every university student inside a web of competing codes; Yoruba, Igbo, and Hausa function as major lingua francas, while Nigerian Pidgin English operates as an important informal contact variety across the country (Eberhard, et.al, 2024). The rise of multilingualism in today's society has affected language contact in many ways. This includes clear changes like code-switching, as well as more subtle effects such as the use of loanwords and translated phrases.

(Adegbite, 2010; Akindele & Adegbite, 2005; Adegbija, 2004; Gijn et al., 2023; Holmes, 2001; Rasinger, 2010; Spolsky, 2012; Wei, 2000). Visually impaired students navigate this multilingual terrain under communicative conditions markedly different from those of their sighted peers. Deprived of visual access to text, gesture, and facial expression, they depend almost entirely on auditory and verbal channels to interpret and produce language.

Several studies have examined language use in Nigerian universities, multilingual communication strategies, and the educational experiences of visually impaired students. Studies on code-switching have largely focused on sighted students, while research on visually impaired students has concentrated on issues of access, inclusion, and assistive technologies. (Nwosu et al., 2024; Omede, 2015; Owaniyi & Adetuyi, 2017; Owaniyi & Oladipupo, 2026; Oyekunle et al., 2024).

However, there is a clear lack of studies that examine the language use of visually impaired students from a sociolinguistic perspective. Existing research has not sufficiently explored how visual impairment influences language choice, communication strategies, and interaction patterns in multilingual university settings. As a result, the everyday linguistic behaviour of visually impaired students remains underexplored. Against this background, this study investigates the domain-based language use, code-switching, and communication strategies of selected visually impaired undergraduates at the University of Ilorin, Ilorin, Kwara State, Nigeria.

Language, Sociolinguistics, Multilingualism and Code-Switching in Nigerian Context.

Language has been defined as a conventional system of sounds, signs, and symbols used for communication and self-expression and as a learned, shared, and arbitrary system through which members of a speech community interact based on common cultural experience (Crystal, 2019). Sociolinguistics takes this social embeddedness of language as its starting point, examining how language varies across social groups and contexts and what social meanings attach to particular linguistic choices (Holmes & Wilson, 2017). Nigeria's multilingual character, sustained by over five hundred languages and formalised, if imperfectly, through the National Policy on Education (Udoeye, 2016), means that university students routinely move between English, indigenous languages, and Pidgin, depending on their interlocutors and settings (Adegbija, 2004; Wardhaugh, 2006). Fishman (1972) concept of the domain, understood

as a cluster of situations typically governed by a given language or variety, offers a useful lens for understanding how Nigerian university students distribute their languages across academic and social life. Communication strategies, meanwhile, describe the techniques speakers use to manage gaps between their communicative intentions and their available linguistic resources (Tarone, 1977; Dornyei, 1995). Achievement strategies such as paraphrase, circumlocution, and code-switching allow a speaker to work around a gap rather than abandon the communicative effort. In contrast, compensatory strategies rely on paralinguistic resources such as gesture and tone. Visually impaired speakers cannot produce or perceive most visual compensatory signals, so verbal and auditory strategies become their main communication methods.

Code-switching refers to the alternation between languages or varieties within or across utterances (Gumperz, 1982; Myers-Scotton, 1993), while code-mixing describes the blending of elements from two languages within a single utterance (Poplack, 1980). Structurally, switching may occur between sentences, within a sentence, or as a brief tag insertion, and functionally it serves purposes ranging from identity signalling to lexical gap-filling (Myers-Scotton, 1993; Nazri & Kassim, 2023). Nigerian studies confirm that switching is a pervasive feature of university student interaction: Nduka and Osagie (2022) found that a majority of students switched codes during collaborative academic activity, while Adebayo (2021) documented switching among Yoruba-English bilinguals as chiefly a marker of ethnic solidarity in informal settings. Owaniyi & Oladipupo, 2026; Owaniyi & Adetuyi, 2017)

Theoretical framework

This study is anchored on Hymes (1972) *Ethnography of Communication*, operationalised through the *SPEAKING* model, conceptualises language as social action shaped by setting, participants, ends, act sequence, key, instrumentalities, norms, and genre and Myers-Scotton's markedness theory. This framework is particularly appropriate for comparing the language use of visually impaired students across academic and social contexts. Myers-Scotton's markedness theory conceptualises language choice and code-switching within a cost-benefit framework, distinguishing between 'unmarked' and 'marked' codes. This model clarifies how speakers select languages to reflect their social positioning in diverse contexts. The theory's applicability to the present study is evident in the language choices made by visually impaired

undergraduates across different situations. The central premise of this model is that for any given interaction, there is an unmarked choice, defined as the code expected in that context (Myers-Scotton, 2002). Communication Accommodation Theory (Giles, Taylor & Bourhis, 1973; Giles, Edwards & Walther, 2023) interprets code choice as a response to interlocutors, distinguishing between convergence, in which speakers adjust toward an interlocutor's code, and divergence, in which speakers maintain or emphasize linguistic differences to assert identity. Since visually impaired students cannot access visual identity cues that typically inform accommodation, their reliance on auditory signals such as accent and vocabulary in calibrating code choice warrants particular analytical attention.

In a bid to investigate domain-based language use, code-switching, and communication strategies among visually impaired university students in Nigeria, this study relied on the elicited data from 20 purposively sampled visually impaired undergraduates from the University of Ilorin, Ilorin, Kwara State, Nigeria. Specifically, this study is guided by the following objectives:

- i. Discuss the language varieties used by visually-impaired students in academic and social contexts at the University of Ilorin;
- ii. Examine the communication strategies employed by visually-impaired students in navigating university life; and
- iii. Investigate the influence of visual impairment on code-switching and code-mixing behaviour among the students.

Methodology

The study adopted a survey research design suited to exploring language use in real-life social contexts. The population comprised all registered visually impaired undergraduate students at the University of Ilorin, from which twenty participants were purposively sampled. Data were collected through a structured interview guide administered orally in a face-to-face setting, ensuring equal access. Interviews lasted between twenty-five and thirty-five minutes, were audio-recorded with consent, and transcribed verbatim. Responses were analysed descriptively using frequency counts and percentages. Seventeen respondents (85%) were totally blind and three (15%) partially sighted; Yoruba was the most common mother tongue (80%), followed by other Nigerian languages (Hausa and Edo) (20%). Informed consent, confidentiality, and voluntary participation were observed throughout.

Results and discussion

The data collected were analysed from a sociolinguistics perspective using descriptive methods to deepen the knowledge on the language domain-based language use, code-switching, and communication strategies among visually impaired university students in Nigerian conventional schools; a case study of University of Ilorin.

Table 5.1: Demographic analysis

Demographic Profile	Range	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	15	75
	Female	5	25
	Total	20	100
Age	16-20	2	10
	21-25	15	75
	26-30	3	15
	Total	20	100
Level of education	100 level	1	5
	200 level	6	30
	300 level	8	40
	400 level	5	25
	Total	20	100
Degree of Visual Impairment	Total blindness	17	85
	Partial blindness	3	15
Total		20	100
Indigenous language	Yoruba	16	80
	Other Nigerian languages	4	20

Table 5.1 outlines the demographic profile of the students. Among 20 respondents, 15 (75%) are male, while 5 (25%) are female. This signifies that most respondents are male. In terms of age distribution, 2 students (10%) are within the 16–20 year age bracket, 15 students (75%) fall within the 21–25 year range, and 3 students (15%) belong to the 26–30 year age group. These data reveal that the predominant age group of the visually impaired students is between 21 and 25 years old. Regarding educational attainment, 1 student (5%) is in the 100 level, 6 students

(30%) are in the 200 level, 8 students (40%) are in the 300 level, and 5 students (25%) are in the 400 level. This indicates that most of the visually impaired students are in the 300 level. Most of the students identified Yoruba (80%) as their indigenous language, while 20% identified other Nigerian languages as their indigenous languages. Furthermore, 85% of students are totally blind, while 15% are partially blind. This implies that all the students examined are visually impaired.

Language use across domains

Table 5.2: Language Use in Academic Settings (n = 20)

Response	Frequency	%
English only	8	40
Mostly English, sometimes switches (Code-Switching)	9	45
Mother tongue alongside English (Code-Mixing)	5	25
Total	20	100

Field Survey 2026

Table 5.2 shows that English dominates the academic domain: 30% of respondents used English exclusively in class; 45% used mostly English with occasional switching, together accounting for 75% of the sample. Only 15% used their mother tongue alongside English. This implies the predominant use of English in the educational domain.

Table 5.3: Language Use in Social Settings (n = 20)

Response	Frequency	%
English only	1	5
Mother tongue only	2	10
Mix of English and mother tongue	8	40
Nigerian Pidgin English	4	20

Mix of all languages freely	5	25
Total	20	100

Field Survey (2026)

Table 5.3 shows a marked reversal in social settings: only 5% of respondents used English exclusively, while 40% preferred a mix of English and their mother tongue, and 25% mixed all available languages freely. This domain-based contrast is consistent with Fishman's (1972) prediction that different language norms govern different social contexts, and with Adebayo (2021), who finds that informal peer interaction is a primary site of mother tongue use among Nigerian students. The result above shows evidence of code-switching and mixing as the patterns of language use of the visually impaired students.

Communication strategies

Table 5.4: Strategy Used When Expression Fails in One Language (n = 20)

Response	Frequency	%
Switch to a language that expresses the idea better	8	40
Describe/explain using simpler words	6	30
Ask for help finding the right word	3	15
Use a phrase from another language as filler	2	10
Avoid the topic and move on	1	5
Total	20	100

Field Survey (2026)

When expression failed in one language, switching to a language that better conveyed the idea was the most common recourse (40%), followed by describing the idea in simpler terms (30%) and appealing to the interlocutor for help (15%). Only 5% avoided the topic altogether (Table 5.4). Managing communication without visual cues relied predominantly on tone and the content of the interlocutor's speech (45%) and on asking clarifying questions (25%); notably, no respondent claimed to have adapted so fully that the absence of visual cues posed no challenge. The

result here indicates that visually impaired students employ multi-directional communication strategies to survive as students and navigate conventional school environments.

Influence of Visual Impairment on Code-Switching
Table 5.5: Frequency of Code-Switching and Code-Mixing (n = 20)

Response	Frequency		Percentage (%)
Yes, very often	7	35	
Yes, sometimes	9	45	
Rarely	3	15	
No, I try to stay in one language at a time	1	5	
Total	20	100	

Table 5.6: Influence of Visual Impairment on Code-Switching Behaviour (n = 20)

Response	Frequency	%
Switch more; rely on verbal communication	8	40
Switch less; cannot read social cues	5	25
No perceived effect	4	20
Not sure	3	15
Total	20	100

Field Survey (2026)

Table 5.5 reveals that 80% of respondents reported switching or mixing codes at least occasionally (35% very often, 45% sometimes), confirming that code-switching is a prevalent feature of the communicative behaviour of the visually impaired students and aligns with broader findings on Nigerian university students (Jegede, 2024; Nduka & Osagie, 2022; Owaniyi & Adetuyi, 2017). When asked how their impairment influenced this behaviour, 40% indicated increased switching due to greater reliance on verbal communication. In comparison, 25% reported switching less because they could not

perceive the social cues that typically prompt switching among sighted speakers (see Table 5.6). These findings suggest that visual impairment does not consistently suppress or amplify multilingual behaviour but interacts with it in diverse ways across individuals.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This study demonstrates that visually impaired students at the University of Ilorin are active, strategically competent multilingual communicators whose language use is strongly shaped by domain, closely patterned by the demands of the SPEAKING model's components, and substantially motivated by the pursuit of precise expression. Rather than being linguistically disadvantaged in any simple sense, these students display heightened reliance on verbal and code-switching strategies precisely because non-verbal channels are unavailable to them. At the same time, formal lectures and other visually structured settings remain disproportionately demanding, pointing to a need for more inclusive pedagogical communication.

The study recommends that academic staff receive training in verbally explicit, disability-sensitive communication for large-group teaching; that peer mentorship schemes be introduced to ease the communicative demands of group work; and that future research adopt longitudinal designs to track how code-switching patterns and communication strategies evolve as visually impaired students' progress through their studies.

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