Code-switching in Rwanda: A case study of Kigali City Secondary Schools

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Abstract

This paper investigates the phenomenon of code-switching (CS) in three schools in Kigali City, the capital of Rwanda, an essentially monolingual country with Kinyarwanda as the mother tongue of all Rwandans and French as a second language. In schools, both these languages served as mediums of instruction until 2009, when there was a sudden move by the government of Rwanda to introduce English as the sole medium of instruction in all schools, catching both teachers and students unprepared for this change. Hence, the general observation is that one of the strategies teachers and students employ to overcome the obstacles to teaching and learning in English is CS. Using questionnaires and focus group interviews, this paper looks at CS in secondary classrooms in three districts in Kigali City and addresses three questions: (i) whether CS is an unmarked feature in Rwandan schools; (ii) the extent to which CS is prominent in the classroom; and (iii) the languages being switched.

Introduction

Reports on challenges in the teaching and learning of English in ESL and EFL classrooms abound in the research literature on second language education. The complexity is compounded when English is taught and learnt in a basically monolingual community like Rwanda where the whole population speak Kinyarwanda and thus share a common mother tongue. Since Kinyarwanda adequately meets the needs of the people in their everyday lives, Rwandans may not see the need to learn another language, even one that is being used worldwide. Thus, the introduction of English as a medium of instruction, a language hardly used in Rwanda before 2009, further complicates the educational situation. The learning process was already a complex one (Williams & Burden, 1997), and the directive for English to be used as a medium of instruction has made the whole teaching and learning process even more challenging. Because Kinyarwanda and French had been the main languages of instruction in the primary and secondary schools until 2009, teachers and students suddenly found themselves having to grapple with a situation which they were largely unprepared for.

This situation, and also the fact that there have yet to be any studies on CS in Rwanda, prompted this paper to investigate one of the strategies employed by both teachers and students to cope in the classroom: code-switching (henceforth CS). The purpose of this paper is to carry out a detailed study of CS in Rwandan classrooms since the introduction of English as a medium of instruction. Based on data collected from three schools from three districts of Kigali City, specifically E. S. Kanombe in Kicukiro district, G. S. Rugando in Gasabo district, and Lycee de Kigali in Nyarugenge district, it sets out to address the following questions:

(i)   How common is CS in Kigali City secondary schools?
(ii) What are some of the reasons for CS?
(iii) What languages are being switched in the classrooms?

As CS is the focus of the questions posed above, a review of the phenomenon and related studies will first be provided.

Code-switching

Many authors have attempted to clarify what CS is. For Hymes (1974) CS can be defined as the alternative use of two or more languages, varieties of language or even speech styles. However, according to Bullock and Toribio (2009), CS comprises a broad range of contact phenomena and is difficult to characterise definitively. They define it as "the ability on the part of bilinguals to alternate effortlessly between their two languages" (Bullock & Toribio, 2009:1). Valdes-Fallis (1978) takes CS as the use of two languages simultaneously or interchangeably and implies some degree of competence in the two languages even if bilingual fluency is not fully established.

In line with the school context, Milroy and Musyken (1995) define CS in education as the alternating use by bilinguals of two or more languages in the same classroom. In a similar perspective, Kamisah and Misyana (2011) confirm that empirical studies have demonstrated that, in many countries, it is quite difficult to find classroom discourse in a single language, hence the existence of CS in many classes around the world.

Considering CS as well as code-mixing (CM), Bokamba (1989) claims that CS is the mixing of words, phrases and sentences from two distinct grammatical (sub-)systems across sentence boundaries within the same speech event, while CM is the embedding of various linguistic units such as affixes (bound morphemes), words (unbound morphemes), phrases and clauses from a cooperative activity where the participants, in order to in infer what is intended, must reconcile what they hear with what they understand. Ayeomoni (2006) claims that CS and CM are well-known traits in the speech patterns of the average bilingual in human societies the world over. Distinguishing CS from CM, Bokamba (1988) believes that CS does not require the integration of the rules of the two languages involved in the discourse, whereas CM does. However, Bokamba claims that because both kinds of switch can occur as part of the same conversational turn, with both serving the same social function, the CM versus CS distinction is poorly motivated.

Based on all the above, one can sum up that in communication, CS and CM refer to the use of any kind of language alternation between two languages. In this paper, no attempt is made to distinguish between CS and CM, so all switching is referred to as CS.

Code-switching in the classroom

According to Kamisah and Misyana (2011), research has revealed that speakers engage in CS for a variety of reasons, and it may be discourse-related or participant-related. In her study of content-based lectures, Kamisah (2009, cited in Kamisah & Misyana, 2011) observed that CS serves some functions such as signalling topic change, giving and clarifying explanations, enacting social relationships, and mitigating messages. Kamisah & Misyana (2011) also point out that the influence of science and technology in education is considered to be an important factor contributing to CS behaviour in the classroom. In her investigation of the CS phenomenon in a university teaching context in Libya, Eli-Fiki (1999) found that despite the country's language policy which promotes the maintenance and purity of Arabic, CS was a dominant feature and the study revealed that there is a kind of limited resistance to the English language in technical and scientific topics among the speakers. According to Gysels (1992), CS may be used to achieve two things: to fill a linguistic/conceptual gap; or for other multiple communicative purposes.

CS is found in many ESL classrooms where there are switches between English and the mother tongue. In their study in Kenya, Merrit et al. (1992) showed that CS between English and the mother tongue in three Kenyan primary schools occurred when the teacher wanted to

reformulate information, bring in new content and attract students' attention. This situation has been observed in many African countries in which most learners and teachers share a language other than the English.

Generally, one could consider CS as a conversational strategy whereby a speaker changes a linguistic code so as to establish, maintain or destroy group boundaries, so it is used partly to create or change interpersonal relationships.

Functions of CS in the classroom

It has been claimed that speakers use CS for intra-group identity, poetic creativity, and the expression of modernisation (Ayeomoni, 2006). According to Kamwangamalu (1989), CS has become normal in bilingual communities. People also use CS to undermine certain traditional values (Kachru, 1989). Cheng and Buttler (1989) pointed out other effects of CS that make one language more dominant than the other, thereby causing the individual to switch usually to the dominant language in the community.

In a study by Malekela (2004) conducted in Tanzania, one of the aspects assessed was the use of CS. The findings revealed that CS was observed in the schools at different levels of education, among teachers and students from English to Kiswahili (the mother tongue of most Tanzanians). Malekela (2004) points out that CS is not only an issue at secondary school level; it is also practised at university level, as long as both the lecturers and students are Tanzanians. Some of the teachers are aware of CS in the classroom and it happens during different teaching sessions (Rubagumya, 1998). According to Malekela:

> Experienced and realistic teachers often switch to Kiswahili if they realise that their students are not getting the message being conveyed in English, and this happens despite the directive that teachers should use English only when teaching subjects that require the use of English medium. (Malekela, 2004, p.4)

In a study conducted on school-aged children in a community in Nigeria where Yoruba is the mother tongue, Ayeomoni (2006) noted that before the children attain school age, 90% of them are monolinguals in their first language, Yoruba. He wanted to investigate what happens when children start school and come into contact with other languages, and he found that at primary age, English starts to play an increasingly important role in their communicative lives while Yoruba is still being acquired as L1 in addition to being taught as a school subject. From primary school, two languages (Yoruba and English) start to co-exist in the speech of the average child in the community, and the child starts to become bilingual right from the primary school stage of education. Since, at this stage, the grammar of the first language has not been fully mastered, and children naturally want to express themselves using all the linguistics resources at their disposal, it is likely that the process of "grammatical coalescence" of Yoruba and English begins at this level.

Ayeomoni's observation is that in many countries all over the world, it is not possible to find a school where one first language dominates in a given community, and it is also hard to find teachers of ESL/EFL who can teach without engaging in CS as long as they are also native speakers of the first language used in the community.

Rwanda is no exception in this respect. All Rwandans share a common language, Kinyarwanda, the mother tongue that is used in all people's daily activities. Few learners master English, so it is not yet a language of communication in Rwandan daily activities, not even a language that one can confirm to have really attained a level as a second language; so

the people tend to code-switch using linguistic input they have gained in the three different languages they encounter at school.

Methodology

Sampling and data collection

The population in this study involved all the teachers of English from the schools investigated and students from one of the senior two (second year of secondary education) classrooms randomly selected from each of the schools. Schools were selected by purposive sampling taking into account that they had to include a higher performing school, a middle performing school, and finally a lower performing school. For the selection of students in the focus group interviews, this form of sampling was also used to have a mixture of students with different performances. According to Oliver (2006) purposive sampling is a form of non-probability sampling in which decisions concerning the individuals to be included in the sample are taken by the researcher, based upon a variety of criteria which may include specialists' knowledge of the research issue or capacity and willingness to participate in the research. Two instruments were used in the collection of data: questionnaires and focus group interviews. In addition, classroom observations were conducted to corroborate the findings of the questionnaires and interviews.

Questionnaires

The first questionnaire was distributed to the year two students in the three schools selected. The other questionnaire was distributed to all the teachers of English from the three schools in this study. Data were collected between April and July 2012, and 123 questionnaires were distributed to students while 11 questionnaires were distributed to teachers of English from those schools. A translation into Kinyarwanda was provided for the students' questionnaire to help them answer questions they understand clearly. All teachers and students responded to the questionnaires which are included in the Appendices.

Focus group interviews

Best and Khan (1986) assume that in a qualitative study, interviews may yield the advantage that by building rapport with the interviewees, the interviewer is able to get some confidential information which they might be reluctant to express through writing. This is particularly true for focus group interviews. Ho (2006) claims that the focus group can encourage respondents to open up and talk freely about what they do in their language. For this study, three focus group interviews were conducted with students. From each school, eight students were randomly selected in one of the year 2 classes which participated in the focus group interview. The topics were based on an interview guide prepared prior to the interviews. The interviewees responded to such questions, "Do you think there is a lot of use of code-switching in your classes? If yes, from which language to which language, and finally when and how do you think it helps you learning English?"

Classroom observations

Classroom observations were also carried out, bearing in mind Dörnyei's (2007) claim that they provide more direct information than self-reported accounts. Moreover, observation serves to collect objective information because the researcher sees the behaviour rather than

relying on self-report as the basic source of data (Mugenda & Mugenda, 2003). Accordingly, two classroom observations were undertaken in one class of each school in this study. Both student and teacher participation were analysed through classroom observations. The main aim was to find out the extent to which CS is used and which languages are involved. Classroom observations provided supplementary information to what has been gathered. The data were then subjected to various methods of analysis, namely tabulation and content analysis.

Findings and Discussion

The first question in both questionnaires was about the frequency of CS in schools. The results from the students are shown in Table 1.

Response	Number
Yes	105 (85.3%)
No	8 (14.6%)

Table 1   Students' responses to the question "Do you ever use a mixture of English and French or English and Kinyarwanda because of missing words to express your ideas in English?"

As shown in Table 1, 105 learners (85.3%) confirmed that they use a mixture of languages in their learning process, while 18 learners (14.6%) denied this, claiming that they do not use such a mixture.

Table 2 shows the results from the similar first question in the questionnaire for the teachers. It can be seen that eight teachers agree that their students code-switch in the classroom, while three claim that they do not.

Response	Number
Yes	8
No	3

Table 2   Teachers' responses to the question "Do you think your students code-switch in the classroom?"

The classroom observations confirmed that students like to use a mixture of English and Kinyarwanda while responding to teacher's instructions. For example, in one class a teacher asked learners to take sheets of papers as she wanted them to do some exercises. Thinking that the teacher was going to give them a quiz, some of them repeated the following sentence, "Tubabarire ntitwiteguye quiz teacher!" [Forgive us teacher, we are not prepared for the quiz!].

In another class, a teacher asked learners to take their textbooks, go to a given page and do exercises in pairs. In chorus, some students asked the teacher, "Turahera hehe teacher?" [Where are we supposed to start, teacher?]. On another day, the teacher entered the class and asked students to take pieces of papers. Afraid that they were going to have a quiz without warning, some of them responded saying, "Ntabwo turi muri primaire teacher" [We are not in primary, teacher]. This last example involves the use of three languages: Kinyarwanda, French ('primaire') and English.

It was also observed that when teachers are teaching, most learners keep interacting between themselves in Kinyarwanda. Furthermore, it was noted that teachers rely on the use of CS, even when giving directions about what is going to take place in the class. In one class, when the time to perform a task arrived, the teacher addressed the students in Kinyarwanda and saying, "Mwicare mu matsinda ya bane bane and do the work" [Sit in groups of 4

students each and do the work]. Due to Rwandan teachers' use of CS, it was observed that students tend to ask all their questions in Kinyarwanda instead of making an effort to express the meaning in English. Hence, taking into account that teachers are generally taken by learners as their models, one might suggest that such a practice by teachers may hinder learners from developing fluency in the target language, as they may regard CS as the normal way to learn English.

Response	Number
Always	5 (4%)
Often	13 (10.5%)
Sometimes	90 (73.1%)
Never	15 (12.1%)

Table 3   Students' responses to the question, "How often do your teachers code-switch from English to other languages?"

Table 3 shows that most students, 90 (73.1%), stated that CS is sometimes used by their teachers, 13 students (10.5%) said it is used often, while 5 of the students (4.0%) claimed that CS is used always. Though a small number of the students, 15 (12.1%), claimed that teachers never use CS, the above results largely confirm the existence of CS by teachers.

The second question in the questionnaire for the teachers aimed to find out what the reasons are behind the use of CS as teaching and learning takes place. Many reasons were provided by the teachers, and some of them are shown below:

Students code-switch in order to understand the lesson content.

They code-switch because there is too much interference of the mother tongue and when they speak they lack appropriate words/vocabulary in English and refer to their mother tongue.

In their communication, students may fail to ask a certain question in English and use Kinyarwanda or French.

Because of their first language interaction.

Students like to code-switch because according to them English is a non-examinable subject; it is of no immediate benefits to learners outside class, and then the least important of the three official languages in Rwanda.

They are more competent in mother tongue which is Kinyarwanda and have some problems in English, especially the speaking.

They are always dominated by their mother tongue. So, they have tendency to speak Kinyarwanda among themselves.

Learners like to code switch because English is a new language to them and they have no vocabulary to use it properly and the fact that they all share one language in common they find easy to interact using the shared language.

As presented above, teachers give different reasons which can be classified under the following three main categories as the main reasons for students to code-switch inside and outside the classroom when they are trying to interact in English: poor background in English and lack of vocabulary in English, the domination and interference of Kinyarwanda, and finally less value of English in the Rwandan base community.

As will be presented in the last two questions from the students' questionnaire, one rationale for CS may be to facilitate understanding, though it also may also help speeding things up so the required curriculum content is covered.

Response	Number
I understand easily	57 (46.3%)
I understand with some difficulty	60 (48.7%)
I can hardly understand	3 (2.4%)
I understand nothing	3 (2.4%)

Table 4   Students' responses to the question "To what extent do you understand your lesson when teachers use English only?"

In Table 4 above, the results show that though 57 learners (46.3%) representing a considerable number of the respondents assumed that they have no understanding problem when teachers stick to the use of English only, the biggest number of respondents, 60 (48.7%), confirmed that they understand with some difficulty when their teachers rely on English only without CS.

Response	Number
I learn easily	100 (81.3%)
I learn with some difficulties	15 (12.1%)
I can hardly understand	3 (2.4%)
I understand nothing	5 (4.6%)

Table 5   Students' responses to the question "How is your learning simplified when your teachers use CS to explain the content of your course in Kinyarwanda or in another language?"

In Table 5 above, 100 students (81.3%) confirmed that whenever teachers use CS to explain some aspect of the language or the course content in general, they learn easily, while only 15 learners (12.1%) said that they learn with difficulty.

To sum up, based on the above findings on the existence of CS in the teaching and learning process in Kigali City schools, the reasons behind its existence and the impact CS has on learners, one can assume that Rwandan learners' level of English is still too low for them to learn everything in English, so the use of CS helps them to understand things easily, especially when teachers try to explain something in Kinyarwanda. Many reasons for the existence of CS in the classrooms were also provided, ranging from simplification of the subject content to the teaching and learning process in general. A low level of English or poor English background among Rwandans, less value and limited or non-existent usage of English in the base community where the mother tongue is dominant, and the fact that Kinyarwanda remains the only language shared by both teachers and students are also claimed to be reasons for the use of CS in classrooms.

Findings from focus group interviews

In the focus group interview with 8 students randomly selected in each of the 3 schools covered in this study, discussions tackled CS in the process of teaching and learning English. The interviews aimed to find out the extent to which CS is used, from which language into which language, and what effect it has on both students and teachers. The results show that all the respondents from the three groups confirm that CS is common in their learning process.

A content analysis carried out on the data has revealed that, in all the schools, students agree that CS is used in their classes, and it is mainly done from English into Kinyarwanda. English-French and English-Swahili switches are also sometimes mentioned, but they are not

as frequent as English-Kinyarwanda. One can explain the dominant switch from English into Kinyarwanda by the fact that most teachers in service are Rwandans who grew up and studied in Rwanda and they all share Kinyarwanda with their students.

Table 6 shows the languages involved as CS and their frequency of use in all the classes from the three schools where the focus group interviews were conducted.

Schools	Number	English–Kinyarwanda	English–French	English–Swahili
School I	5	4	1	-
School II	3	2	1	-
School III	5	3	1	1

Table 6   The use of CS, frequency and languages of occurrence

As presented in Table 6, all the respondents agreed that CS is a common feature in the classroom as lessons are taking place, and it is not an easy task to avoid because of the background of teachers and their students. Most of them had been involved in French language-based education until the new shift into using English was declared at the end of 2008 and started being implemented in early 2009.

In the observations done in the classes of the schools in this study, it was observed that both teachers and students code-switch a lot and this is mainly done from English into Kinyarwanda. However, CS was also observed from English to French, and the reason is that most of the teachers in service are better in French than English, so when they do not code-switch from English to Kinyarwanda, they use French.

From this perspective, one has to consider also some teachers from Congo who do not understand Kinyarwanda while their English is also not well developed. Congo is a western neighbour of Rwanda and the most dominant French speaking country in Africa. Congolese teachers were teaching in Rwanda for many years when French was used as a language of instruction because there were not enough Rwandan teachers to offer education in all schools in Rwanda. When the shift in policy from using French into English was introduced in 2009, Rwanda could not afford to get enough teachers trained in English, and as former Rwandan teachers trained in French, Congolese teachers were also maintained and offered some English training programs to let them continue their work. For these Congolese teachers, it is easier to code-switch from English to French, or occasionally from English to Swahili, than switching to Kinyarwanda.

Through the focus group interviews, the researcher also aimed to find out details about the reasons behind the existence and use of CS. Some reasons are summarised below.

Reasons for CS in Kigali City ESL classrooms

Respondents pointed out different reasons for CS, and these go from the usage of Kinyarwanda in the whole community, French educational background among teachers and students, teachers and students having a low level in English, and finally a will for teachers to finish what is in the curriculum that they all consider to be vast and not really adapted to the students' level of understanding.

Predominant use of Kinyarwanda

Undoubtedly, one also has to consider the major reason for the common use of Kinyarwanda by both teachers and students. One of the respondents expressed this in the following terms:

> As we know that our mother tongue – you know – we were raised speaking Kinyarwanda since we were born. So, when a teacher come and starts – when he explains in

> Kinyarwanda as like for example a teacher in teaching us English and when he tells – he says the vocabulary which is new to us, but when he changes and say it like this one is called this in Kinyarwanda. So, we know it. (R2b SC1).

French educational background

Most current teachers received their education in French as a language of instruction and a also second language. In addition, the fact that they had been using this language in their teaching for many years, results in them using it again in their classrooms. This is similar to what happens to students who also have been using French more than English. Accordingly, both teachers and students code-switch easily as lessons are taking place. One student explained this situation as follows:

> I think it helps because some of us come from different countries. Some of us are from English countries while others are from French ones, and those in Rwanda. If teachers code-switch it helps a lot those who don't understand English well. (R6B SC2).

Teachers and students' low level in English

It is likely to be easy for people sharing one language to code-switch from other languages to their shared language as they are addressing each other, as this will facilitate their communication. This is the case for Rwandan students who are still at a basic level in learning and using English, and those teachers who teach them while they are also learning and receiving in-service training to develop their English language skills. One of the respondents expressed this in the following terms:

> Some use Kinyarwanda English because as all students, not all of us know English. Some do not know it very well. So, for a teacher to make students to understand very well, that is why they mix English and Kinyarwanda or French and Kinyarwanda. (R6 SC1).

Although one of the respondents from the highest-performing school in this study did not deny the existence of CS, he said that it is not very common. He further justified its occurrence by the fact that teachers are also learning English and have not yet fully mastered it so that they have no complicated words or difficult expressions to use, and these may need to be translated from English into another language like Kinyarwanda. He said:

> The teachers who are teaching us English are the teachers who followed – who have been using French in their education….. So nowadays, they are also trying to learn English as they are teaching us. So, they don't use hard words from English […..] They are not yet on a good level in English so that they can make code-switching for us not to understand easily. So, it is not common for us. (R8 SC2).

However, without contracting what this respondent pointed out, this may justify again the use of CS by teachers if they do not have a full command of English and some of them cannot finish the teaching session using English only.

Subject matter and curriculum aspect

According to some respondents, CS enables students to understand the subject content quickly, which allows teachers to move in their aim to finish the program. One of the respondents said:

> Code-switching helps most of us to master a syllabus because if the teacher doesn't translate, most of us will face a difficult of not getting what the subject is all about. So I think code-switching is a method which may be used to help us understand. (R5b SC2).

Other students reinforced this idea of simplification in understanding their subjects, especially when they are dealing with scientific terms and they find CS helpful to them. One of the respondents said:

> It depends with the subject. There is some subject which – like they mix usually, but there is some which they mix sometimes like for example if you come to biology. Like biology, if you need to explain it very well for a student to understand very well - that's why we mix like that. (R7 SC1).

Summary

The findings confirm that CS is a common feature in Rwandan schools and both teachers and learners rely on it under some circumstances. Having evolved in different language backgrounds and followed different systems of education, they find CS useful for language learning. Teachers manage to explain the content and then move quickly to finish the program, while learners manage to understand some concepts more easily when they are translated into the languages they have mastered better, especially Kinyarwanda their mother tongue.

However, considering all the above, we should conduct further research on this use of CS and find out whether it also helps learners in developing their communication skills in the target language, which should be the main goal of learning ESL. If not, other measures should be taken to ensure that students are learning in a manner that will allow them to develop communication skills in the target language.

Acknowledgements

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Appendix A. Questionnaire for students

Instructions (*Amabwiriza*)

For each question, underline the best option for you. (*Kuri buri kibazo, ca akarongoca akarongo ku gisubizo wemeranya nacyo cyane).*

1. Do you ever use a mixture of English and French or English and Kinyarwanda because of missing words to express your ideas in English? (*Hari ubwo ujya uvanga Icyongereza n'Igifaransa, cyangwa Icyongereza n'Ikinyarwanda kubera ko wabuze uburyo uvuga icyo ushaka gusobanura mu cyongereza?*)

   Yes / *Yego*   No / *Oya*

2. How often do your teachers code-switch from English to other languages? (Ni *kangahe abalimu banyu bakoresha izindi ndimi zitari icyongereza iyo babigisha?*)

   a. Always / Buri gihe
   b. Often / Kenshi
   c. Sometimes / Rimwe na rimwe
   d. Never / Nta narimwe

3. To what extent do you understand your lesson when the teachers use English only? (*Ni ku kihe kigero isomo rikorohera iyo umwalimu wawe yigisha akoresheje icyongereza gusa?*)

   a. I understand easily / *Nsobanukirwa vuba*
   b. I understand with some difficulty / *Nsobanukirwa bigoranye*
   c. I can hardly understand / *Kwiga birangora cyane*
   d. I understand nothing / *Nta cyo mbasha gusobanukirwa*

4. How is your learning simplified when your teachers use code-switching to explain the content of language in Kinyarwanda or in another language? (*Usobanukirwa gute iyo umwalimu akoresheje ikinyarwanda cyangwa urundi rurimi mu kubasobanurira mu isomo yigisha?*)

   a. I learn easily / *Kwiga biranyorohera cyane*
   b. I learn with some difficulties / *Ngira ibibazo byinshi mu kwiga*
   c. I can hardly understand / *Kwiga birangora cyane*
   d. I understand nothing / *Nta cyo mbasha gusobanukirwa*

Appendix B. Questionnaire for teachers of English

1.   Do you think your students code-switch in the classroom?

     Yes   No

2. Why do you think students use code-switching in their learning process or their communication?

     ....
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     ....
     ....
     ....
     ....