

Code Switching as a Medium of Instruction in an EFL Classroom

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Abstract—Code Switching (CS) is shifting from one language to another in a conversation. It is a normal every day practice among people in the world for various reasons and usually an unconscious activity. This language switching might not be the whole sentence, but also can occur in brief phrases or words. Therefore, in this study, using CS as a medium of instruction was focused on. Meanwhile, the students' attitude towards CS, the positive impacts of CS on understanding the target language and the negative impacts of CS on students' learning ability were investigated. The data for this study were collected from 4 participants through audio recordings of a classroom observation and students' reflective journals. The findings suggest that the students code switched due to the lack of vocabulary knowledge and being in an informal environment that required the respondents to use language for different purposes; thus CS was used for checking understanding, asking for clarification and socializing. On the contrary, the teacher code switched because of clarification and translation into L1 whenever needed. On the other hand, reflective journals revealed using CS augments understanding of target language and they showed that students had positive views towards the application of CS.

Index Terms—code switching, bilingual education, student CS, teacher CS, EFL classroom instruction

I. INTRODUCTION

CS is a general occurrence in Iranian English learning context. Researchers have got different views about its definition. It is generally defined as a nonstandard use of L2 within an L1 situation by bilinguals or even those who speak two or more languages in the same conversation (Muysken, 1995). All over Iran, people communicate in different languages such as Persian, Turkish and Arabic. The official language is Persian; hence, People never get the chance to communicate in English unless they face a coercible situation like career requirements that make them use English in their every day conversation. In this case, use of English is rare; thus authentic context or real exposure to the language outside the language classroom is very limited, and this augments a tendency of using their mother tongue in the learning setting.

The aim of the study was to figure out possible impacts on students' understanding of target language, students' learning ability and to discover their attitudes toward utilizing CS as a medium of instruction in a learning environment.

Background of the Study

Researchers have disparaging views on the use of CS and this is based on various theoretical models and research methodologies. The dominant perspectives in the study of CS have been sociolinguistic in nature. The sociolinguistic approach has explored languages in touch with bilingual or multilingual communities and deals with the social and political motivations for its use. Little has been done on the sociolinguistic approach about CS such as attitudes of students, impact on their learning process, perceptions about linguistic features and situations in which CS occurs. Moreover, there is no sufficient literature about the impact of CS on students' understanding of target language and students' learning ability to see whether CS augments or deteriorates their progress in learning the target language.

Beside the perspective above, researchers propose different approaches toward CS. For example, (McClure, 2001; Poplack, 1978; Genishi, 1976; Zentella, 1982) suggest that language proficiency, language preference, social identity, and role of the participants are also crucial in a CS situation. For other linguists, the relationship between the two languages and the status, power, and prestige associated with them is also a deciding factor when code switching.

Research Strategy

The research strategy was employed within the qualitative research paradigm. The research data was gathered in three forms: an audio recording of classroom observation, self-report audio recording while observing the class and taking reflective journals of students.

Observation was done in the most unnoticeable way possible. Data was collected to determine how CS as a medium of instruction affected the learning and teaching processes. The researcher was the primary means of data collection, interpretation, and analysis. As a participant observer, the researcher monitored how the students reacted to CS application, and how they integrated CS during their problem solving discussions. The use of participant observation is to be closed to subjects while keeping a professional distance that allows acceptable data collection (Fetterman, 1998).

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

What Is Code Switching?

CS is the communicative exchange between two language codes among people who contribute to those specific codes. In this exchange, a number of social and linguistic factors direct the way CS manifests itself. In natural conversations between two bilinguals, CS includes eighty-four percent single word switches, ten percent phrase switches, and six percent clause switching (Skiba, 1997).

CS occurs in many types. The first type of language switching is called mechanical switching, which appears unintentionally. This type of CS is also known as code mixing. Code mixing happens when the speaker cannot remember an expression, but can recall it in a different language. Another type of CS, known as code changing, is distinguished by fluent intrasentential shifts, altering focus from one language to another. It is motivated by situational and stylistic factors, and the purpose behind the switch between two languages is important (Lipski, 1985).

The reasons for CS are primarily social. Olmedo-Williams (1981) describes nine categories of CS from her study of language mixing in classroom settings. These categories include emphasis, sociolinguistic play, clarification, accommodation, lexicalization, attracting attention, regulating behavior, and miscellaneous switches. She believes that lexicalization and clarification are related to the ability to express oneself better in the other language on a given topic. CS is also influenced by the setting and by the activity. In informal situations, students are more likely to code switch.

Moreover, Goodman and Goodman (1979), in a study on writing in bilingual classrooms, found that students often use language switching in spoken language, but rarely in written language. Since spoken language is less formal than written language, this seems to support Olmedo-Williams' conclusion that students code switch less in formal situations.

Code Switching and Bilingual Education

When learning a new language, most students code switch in the native language as they acquire new vocabulary in the second language. This language behavior may be puzzling for those who are responsible for placing these students in an appropriate educational setting. Although CS is considered as one of the involving features of bilingual speech, still some people think it is a disparaged form of conversation (Boztepe, 2005). An effort should be done to find out what causes CS and how it affects academic achievement while studying using L2.

Teachers can use CS in different activities to teach a second language. For instance, students can form two –member groups and switch languages intentionally in dialogue; it helps them to learn each other's language. Teachers can start a lesson in one language, and then switch to another language, while making the students comprehend both languages (Skiba, 1997).

Usually teachers' beliefs and attitudes influence CS. Apart from their personal understanding of CS, the educational policies affect teachers' language use (Liu & Ahn, 2004). The functions of teacher CS are recognized as topic switch, affective functions, and repetitive functions. In topic switching, the teacher alters his or her language considering the topic being taught. This usually occurs in teaching grammar, while students focus on the new knowledge. Affective functions are important in the declaration of emotions, and forming a relationship between the teacher and the student. In repetitive functions, CS is used to clarify the meaning of a word, while stressing on the content for better comprehension (Sert, 2005).

The functions of student CS are known as equivalence, repetition, and conflict control. Equivalence enables the students to convey information in spite of lack of proficiency. Repetition helps them get mastered in language they are trying to learn, and conflict control is used to prevent misunderstanding in communication (Sert, 2005).

Students' Attitude towards Code Switching

Another theory, which is relevant in this study, is "attitude" which is defined by Eagly and Chaiken as a "psychological tendency that is expressed by evaluating a particular entity with some degree of favor or disfavor" (Eagly & Chaiken, 1993, p.1). Furthermore, attitude is the result of perceptions experienced collaboratively. Consequently, each individual's judgment is inherent and is affected by surrounding factors such as behavior, culture and belief.

III. METHODOLOGY

Participants

According to Hatch (2002), the participants determine whether and to what extent the researcher will have access to the information desired. The present study is the phenomenon of CS either contributing or destructing language learning

activity in a conversation class in a university in Malaysia. The language of learning and teaching in the class is mainly English, yet Persian is also accommodated due to the low proficiency of the students. There were four Iranian students chosen on the basis of purposive sampling. The age of the learners in the study ranged from 25 to 43 years. All of the learners speak Persian as their first language (L1). The teacher/observer who took part in the study was also Persian.

Data Collection Procedure

The data consists of naturally- occurring conversations among learners and their teachers. The researcher also observed conversations among the learners, to realize how they use CS in order to communicate with each other. Since the teacher/ observer was one of the participants and could not take comprehensive notes, she did a self- report audio recording during the observation for analyzing the data effectively afterwards. This was done for efficacy of compiling and analyzing the data. During data collection CS was not explained in order to reduce being influenced by understanding CS. The learners were told that they could use mother tongue when necessary. In this case, the learners were relaxed and spontaneous in their conversations.

The conversations were recorded on a good-quality voice recorder. A small MP3 player was placed at the corner of the desk where the participants were sitting.

At the beginning, the teacher started a discussion about the title of a short story, which students had to read and discuss in pairs and finally reproduce it individually.

The name of the story was "A Mystery", which was written for students who are at intermediate level of English.

Data Analysis

Based on the transcripts of the conversations during observation, the instances of CS to Persian language were identified and counted. For the analysis of CS, the following four questions were addressed in the data analysis and interpretation: 1) the types of language functions for CS; 2) factors affecting CS; 3) learners' attitude towards using CS in the EFL classroom; and 4) positive impacts of CS on students' understanding of target language.

To address these research questions, the reflective journals were analyzed and students' attitudes and their own experience were studied. In their writing, the students proposed some other external factors influencing CS that was not anticipated by the observer. The data analysis also followed a qualitative perspective, and the selected data were analyzed, described and discussed in the following findings section.

IV. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

In this study, through the audio recordings of classroom observation and reflective journals, it could be seen that the teacher and all learners of the two groups made use of CS in class. It could also be seen that CS by the teacher and by the learners was more frequent in using some special language functions such as clarification/persuasion, translation, and socializing. In this analysis, the participants were identified by the first letter of their names: Student S, Students O, Student A, Student R, and the teacher was identified by the letter T. The analysis and interpretation are presented in the following sections.

A. Code Switching and Language Functions

The language functions that were used by students and the teacher included: checking understanding, asking for clarification, clarification/persuasion, translation, and socializing. Each is illustrated with excerpts from the audio recordings.

Checking Understanding

As Flyman-Mattson and Burenhult (1999) explain, the main reason for teachers/students' CS to L1 is to make the audience understand their utterances. The following examples explain checking understanding function better. As it can be seen in the table 4.1, it is used twice only.

Examples:

T: What is the meaning of mystery?

S: *deltang shodan?* (To miss some body?)

In this excerpt, student S wanted to make sure that his understanding of the word 'mystery' is correct, so he code switched and asked the question in Persian with a rising intonation. In another situation, when student O wanted to double-check his understanding of the word track, he asked:

O: Track, *rade pa?* (Trace)

T: No, that is trace.

Asking for Clarification

According to table 4.1, students used the clarification function four times in the recordings. Whenever they found some thing that was a little difficult to understand, they would ask their peers to clarify it. Here is the example of Student O who did not understand teacher's explanation about working in groups, so he asked:

Example:

O: *Tozih bedim dastan raje be chi bud?* (Should we explain what the story was about?)

T: yes.

Another example is about a situation that Student A could not understand the whole picture of the story and Student R reciprocated by using Persian, because she might have taught Student A would not understand unless she switched to Persian.

Example:

A: *mishe ye summery bedi?* (Can you give a summary please?)

R: *Chize ba arzeshe mese Kristal, jawaher dozdide nashode...* (Nothing valuable like crystal or jewelry was stolen...)

Clarification / persuasion

CS makes it possible to give more information to clarify an idea or message. When the students do not know the meaning of the target language word, then it is natural for their group members to present clarification. Here the students have already finished reading the story and wanted to share their understanding with each other through discussion. CS emerged when there was a misunderstanding or an opposite opinion that could not be expressed in English. Especially when they wanted to persuade each other that their understanding of the message of the story was correct.

Example of clarification:

O: Squeez?

T: *Vaghti ye chizi ro michepooni* (when you press some thing firmly with your fingers)

Example of persuasion:

S: Jewelry is stolen.

O: *Na, tanha jayee ke jewelry dare ine dige. Neveshte ke* “the rubber stole nothing else?”, *chize digeyee nadozdide? Nemige jewelry dozdide.* (No, the only place that states jewelry is here; it is stated, “The rubber stole nothing else”? Nothing else is stolen? It doesn’t say Jewelry is stolen).

Translation

Students/teacher often switch their code to translate or elaborate the significant messages while explaining new vocabulary or instructions instead of proceeding in the foreign language; this makes comprehension easier.

For example, when student O was checking his understanding, asking the meaning of track which he had mistaken for trace, the teacher tried to explain and differentiate the word trace from track. Students O and Student R showed their understanding by nodding, but the others did not indicate a signal of understanding, so she had to switch to Persian:

Example:

T: When you walk, you leave traces behind you, which is called track.

(Students O and R nodded as a gesture of understanding while students A and S looked puzzled, so the teacher gave some more explanations):

T: Trace is the indication of passing of some thing, but track is the continuous line of some thing that has recently passed like the marks, which wheels of a car leave after passing.

(Again after the second explanation, they could not understand the slight difference between ‘track’ and ‘trace’, so the teacher code switched):

T: trace *yani asar*. (Trace means trace).

Most of the time translation is really needed especially when explaining grammatical points. Nation (2005) suggests overlooking all the criticism we have heard about translation; he believes that what is shown repeatedly in research acknowledges the effectiveness of this kind of learning.

There was an example indicating teacher’s effort to explain a grammatical point, which the students could not understand due to lack of linguistic competence. She was trying to clarify the position of a pronoun in a sentence and show them how it replaced the noun before that, but they could not understand the meaning of reference that a pronoun refers to, so she code switched:

T: In the third line of paragraph four, we have the pronoun ‘it’ that refers to *marjae zamir* (reference) in the first line of this paragraph.

After she code switched, the students got the whole picture and could understand the meaning of three sentences involved.

Socializing

It was observed that the students switched from the target language to their native language while expressing their feelings of pleasure and displeasure. Flyman-Mattsson and Burenhult (1999) also define the affective functions of CS in the domain of classroom, for example, the automatic expression of emotions in interacting with students. In this study, socializing happened three times: first, when my Turkish student who was not supposed to be in the class entered the class. The atmosphere changed when they saw him, because students started greeting him and joking with him in their mother tongue; the second time CS occurred was when every body expressed their feelings towards the difficulty of the short story; and the last incident of CS happened at the end of the class when the researcher switched off her audio equipments. The students expressed their feelings in CS as shown below:

A: *Taze dasht khoshemoon mioomad!* (We were enjoying it!)

O: *khube khube edame bedim!* (Good, good, let’s continue!)(Laughs)

The frequency of CS based on the language functions the students used is summarized in the table below.

TABLE 1:
FREQUENCY OF CS BASED ON DIFFERENT LANGUAGE FUNCTIONS

Different Language functions	Student A	Student R	Student O	Student S	Teacher T	Total
Checking Understanding	--	--	1	1	--	2
Asking for Clarification	1	--	3	--	--	4
Clarification or Persuasion	--	1	2	--	2	5
Translation	--	--	1	1	3	5
Socializing	2	1	2	1	--	6
Total	3	2	9	3	5	22

B. Factors Affecting CS

Lack of Vocabulary Knowledge

Grosjean (1982) states that people switch when they cannot find the suitable term or when the language being used does not have the appropriate translation. The reason of CS is to fill this linguistic gap. Here is an example:

S: delicious?

O: *khoshmaze* (delicious)

S: *khoshmaze* (delicious)

Informal Environment

Within a less formal situation, the probability of using CS is augmented and students feel free to make use of L1, because they are not afraid of any penalty. By listening to the audio recordings, the researcher figured out that by changing the situation into a friendly one, the students found it possible to communicate in L1; it was as if they all shared the same feeling, because in all informal situations, the whole class code switched together.

Using English-Persian Dictionaries instead of English-English Ones

As shown in the reflective journals, Student R who made the less CS during the observation believed that checking bilingual dictionaries is one main contributing factor for promoting CS. Those who look up the words in bilingual dictionaries and learn the equivalence of words in L1 rather than memorizing the target language synonyms are used to remember words in L1 rather than the target language. This was one of the important points discovered by the researcher that was revealed itself in the reflective journal of students. These findings reflect the effectiveness of reflective journals.

C. Students' Attitude towards CS

CS during instruction affects the learning environment by increasing student understanding, comprehension, and application of the material. With regards to student-teacher relationships as part of a positive learning environment, it helps foster a better relationship with the students. It was easily recognizable that the students loved to follow the instruction when it was presenting in both L1 and target languages. During the observation and also in the reflective journals the students expressed their positive views towards CS and they wished they could have some of the instructions in L1, specially the grammatical ones.

D. Positive Impacts of CS on Target Language Learning

Cole (1998) argues that the strict exclusion of L1 in the classroom can lead to unusual behaviors, such as "trying to explain the meaning of a language item where a simple translation would save time and anguish." However, language teachers should keep in mind that there might be certain times, when the best choice would indeed be to avoid the use of the mother tongue. In this study, both students and the teacher tried to make use of L1 whenever needed. During the observation they tried their best not to code switch; however, when they were discussing the story, they realized that they might get the idea wrong, so they code switched.

E. Limitations of the Research

This study provided an analysis of the use of CS in an EFL classroom. However, it was limited in several ways that might be addressed in future research. One limitation of the study is the small number of participants; since the researcher had to find Persian participants in an international university, the subjects were not so many. Another limitation was the time limit allocated to the research. Regarding this problem, the third research question, which was about the negative impact of CS on students' learning ability and needed to be explored within at least 1 year, was partially answered.

V. CONCLUSION

The results of the study indicated that CS mostly occurred in the classroom to cater for the needs of the students. According to table 4.1, students made use of the functions of language in relation to their needs. Of course the influence of the informal environment should not be overlooked, since the most occurrence of CS was the socializing function.

However, the least happening one was checking for understanding; and clarification and translation were used equally. Overall it was quite obvious that informal environment as well as lack of vocabulary knowledge were the most crucial factors for CS to be appeared.

On the basis of the results, both learners and teachers need to be made aware of the limitations of CS because insensible use of CS can have long-lasting harmful consequences on the learners' production of the target language.

Reflection

This study presents the results of a qualitative study, which investigated the use of CS as a medium of instruction in an EFL classroom. Although the research clearly shows that bilingual education is effective for language students, the effects of CS on students' learning ability is still unclear. While the research regarding CS seems to indicate that its primary purpose is to communicate more effectively, there is still a need to consider how this language behavior affects students' learning ability. There should be a study within a long period of time to figure out whether CS has positive or negative impacts on this issue.

Finally, the findings indicated that CS in oral form allowed for effective communication between students and the instructor in a way that was natural and comfortable for all involved. CS can be a good technique to highlight the significance of a specific piece of information, whether it is a grammar rule, a name or an order. The repetition of one part of the discourse in L1 underlines its importance with regards to the rest of the speech.

According to what has been said until now, even though many teachers still feel uncertain towards the merits of code-changing in teaching a foreign language, CS may be considered as a useful technique in classroom interaction, especially if the goal is to clarify and convey the information to students in an efficient way. More researches in this area can open new dimensions because a better understanding of CS and bilingualism will have positive impacts on the planning for bilingual education. Program developers and policy makers should bear in mind that in the case of language, first we develop understanding and then we develop the language.

Recommendation for Future Works

For future studies, doing a comparative analysis, which includes other languages and students from different ages, is required to see how they use their native language and code switch during their interaction.

There should also be a long period of time for investigating the influence of CS on students' learning ability. The development of linguistic competence of the students within this period identifies the usefulness or harmfulness of CS. CS is a known phenomenon, but its effects on language learning has been rarely investigated. More research on this linguistic phenomenon is needed to add to the small body of literature.

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