

The Concept and Functions of Code Switching In Learning and Communicating In Foreign Language.

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Abstract

A speech community is usually made up of speakers of two or more languages, not just one. Speakers of such communities therefore choose among the languages to use on any occasion. At times, the speakers use two distinct forms of same language in a given speech situation. The domain of contextual factors of conversation to, a large extent, determines the choice or alternation we make while using either of two or three codes. The alternation of language or codes at a time in a given conversation or speech situation is code-switching. This paper examines the essence of using a language by dropping it subsequently in a given speech. It also analyses the benefits of code switching in foreign language teaching. The research used content analysis or corpus to generate data from mostly documented sources. It has established, among other things, that code-switching in the classroom helps to resolve confusion in complex grammar and vocabulary. It suggests that the teacher and students could use code-switching in class to address a variety of functions and challenges that might constrain learning

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Introduction

Code-switching is the practice of alternating between two or more languages or varieties of language in conversation. This occurs mostly within bilingual and multilingual communities. In other words, bilingual speakers can usually vary their language use within a single discourse or across discourses of the same type (Mc Gregor 2009: 168).

There are many reasons to use code switch, as Gregor puts it, code switching “underscores solidarity between conversational partners.” This includes: the need to fit into a group which could be as a force of habit, or to convey thoughts and concepts that might be easier to explain in a specific language. It could also be seen as the practice of moving between variations of languages in different contexts.

Everyone who speaks has learned to code-switch, depending on the situation and setting. Our setting in this work is the non-native speaker classroom, an educational context. In this setting, Code Switching is defined as the practice of switching between a primary and secondary language in a discourse.

What then is the function of code-switching in a foreign language class? As already indicated, code-switching is a widely observed phenomenon normally practised in multilingual and multicultural communities. According to Mattson, A. and Barenhult- Mattson, N. (1999), code switching in the teaching of foreign language in the classroom comes into use either in the teachers' or the students' discourse. This idea might not be accepted by many linguists, but we should also know that the understanding of the functions of code switching between the native or first language and the foreign language has its underlying reasons. The understanding will provide language teachers with heightened awareness of its use in classroom discourse, which will obviously lead to better teaching by knowing when to either eliminate or dominate its use during the foreign language teaching.

Numan and Carter define code switching as “a phenomenon of switching from one language to another in the same discourse” (2001: 275). From this definition, “discourse” will be handled as the students' and teachers' naturally

occurring language use in classroom setting because code –switching is a natural occurrence when two bilingual speakers engage in discourse. Additionally, the languages between which alternation is performed are the Native or English languages which the students are acquainted with and French language that the students are expected to gain competence in.

Functions of Code Switching:

Code switching is very helpful for conflict control when there is no equivalent translation. A teacher might code switch to avoid conflicting meanings that can occur between the native or first language and the target language. Conflict control is a way to avoid having the intended meaning lost in translation. According to Gal (1979), cited in Mc Gregor (2009: 169), “by making choices among available languages or codes within the progress of conversation, speakers strategically manipulate solidarity and distance to serve their goals at the point in the interaction”.

Other functions of code switching include: clarification, reiteration or repetition, explanation, asking, checking for understanding, making inferences, developing vocabulary, class discussion of student's tasks, giving feedback and aiding. This simply means that the use of code switching in the classroom by teachers will clarify instructions and difficult concepts. A teacher may engage in code switching when students have difficulty in comprehending specific words or concepts initially, or when the speaker does not know or remember the appropriate words in one of the languages. People may alter their language to express group identification. So, to reflect a wider understanding of these functions in an educational setting, both teachers' and students' perspectives will be handled separately.

In building relations between “the use and functions of code switching in authentic contexts” and ‘the use and functions of code switching in foreign language classroom”, it should be remembered that a language classroom is a social group. Within a classroom situation, the choice of a variety of codes to use could as well depend on which social group (or level) a student is. The choice of clear unambiguous codes could show that the interlocutors belong to

the same teaching learning community. But using difficult language while code-switching could deny the learner the needed social intimacy to pave the way for asking question (Mc Convell, 1985).

Apart from translation which serves the function of meeting the needs of a mixed bilingual audience with different levels of competence in two languages, code-switching also serves the function of tenor; here, a bilingual speaker considers the age, status or relation between his audience and then switches to a language or code that is most relevant.

Code-switching also plays attitudinal function. A speaker's attitude to what is going on in a speech event could determine the extent to which he could switch from one code to another to get his message across to bilingual readers.

Reasons for code switching may include:

- a. To exclude someone or people from a conversation.
- b. To mark group identity or identify yourselves as belonging to one group.
- c. To provide alternate lexical, phrasal or sentential fillers as obtained in the other language.
- d. To quote someone.
- e. To amplify parts of an utterance.

The teacher's functions of code switching:

The teacher's use of code switching is not always done consciously. This means that he is not always aware of the functions and outcomes of the code switching process. In some cases, it may be regarded as an automatic and unconscious behaviour. All the same, whether conscious or unconscious, it thus serves some basic functions which may be of benefit in language learning environment. These functions are listed as follows: topic switch, affective functions and repetitive functions in Mattson and Burenhuit (1999:61).

In topic switch cases, the teacher alters his language according to the topic that is under discussion. It is normally observed in grammar lessons when the teacher shifts his language to English or mother tongue of the students for

better clarification. This is the situation where students' attention is directed to the new knowledge by making use of Code-Switching and, accordingly, making use of English or the mother tongue as the case may be.

In addition to the function of code switching of topic switch, the phenomenon also carries affective functions which serve as expression of emotions. In this respect, Holmes J. (1992) asserts that code switching is used by the teacher in order to build solidarity and intimate relations with the students. In this perspective, we may speak of the contribution of code switching for creating a supportive language situation in the classroom, though this may not always be a conscious process on the part of the teacher as earlier mentioned above. All the same, one may also infer the same thing for the natural occurrence of code switching as one cannot also guarantee its conscious application.

The third function of code switching in a classroom setting is its repetitive function. Here, the teacher uses code switching in order to transfer the necessary knowledge for clarification. Following the instruction in target language, the teacher code switches to mother tongue or English in order to clarify meaning. By so doing, he stresses importance on the foreign language content for efficient comprehension. However, the tendency to repeat the instruction in mother tongue may lead to some undesired student's behaviours. A learner who is sure that the instruction in foreign language will be followed by a native language translation may lose interest in listening to the former instruction. This may have negative academic consequences as a student is exposed to foreign language discourse limitedly.

Why do language teachers code switch?

Mattson (1999: 61), in particular, is of the opinion that the use of code switching by the teacher helps in the following ways:

(a) To address complex topics: Many language teachers might briefly switch to their students' native language to better explain topics such as grammar, especially when the target language uses concepts that may not be present in the native language like gender articles.

(b) To build rapport: Normally, students learn better in a warm and supportive environment, especially with potentially nerve-wracking subjects like foreign languages. Students just feel more comfortable when they are addressed in their native language, and code-switching makes it easier to build relationship with them. Besides, it makes the students feel that the teacher understands their linguistic cultural background and helps them understand that their teacher can communicate with them in their native language, if necessary. It also helps to resolve confusion or misunderstanding regarding vocabulary and grammar.

(c) In repetitive function, teacher uses code-switching to transfer the necessary knowledge to the students in order to convey clarity. In order to clarify the meaning of the functions, for example, the teacher code-switches from the target language to the native language. In a classroom environment where one only has an hour or so to teach, he/she wants to make sure students clearly and quickly understand everything being communicated to them. Often, the most efficient way to accomplish this is by reverting to their native language.

(d) Another situation where teachers could use code-switching is to carry out the affective functions. In such a situation, the teacher uses code-switches in order to build solidarity and good relationship with the students.

The Functions of Student's Code Switching.

Code switching helps students to understand difficult aspects of the lesson taught and thereby enables them to follow the instructions given despite the fact that they are not always aware of the reasons for code switching as well as its functions and outcomes. Although they may unconsciously perform code switching, it clearly serves some functions either beneficial or not. These functions, according to Eldridge (1996), are: equivalence functions, floor-holding functions, reiteration functions and conflict and control functions.

The equivalent function of students' code switching is when a student inserts the equivalent word in their native language or language variety instead of the target language term because they do not know the term in the second

language. This process is correlated with deficiency in linguistic competence of the target language. This is, therefore, the reason why the student makes use of native lexical item. "Equivalence" functions as a defensive mechanism for students, as it gives them the opportunity to continue communication by bridging the gaps.

The floor-holding function of student's code switching, on the other hand, is used to avoid gaps in communication which result from the lack of fluency in the target language. It therefore has the function of filling the silence during communication when the student may not have words. In such a case, they switch to maintain the conversation. The learners performing code switching for floor-holding generally have the same problem: they cannot recall the appropriate target language structure or lexicon. It may be claimed that this type of language alternation may have negative effects on learning the foreign language, since it may result in loss of fluency in long term.

The third function of students' code switching, the reiteration, is used to reiterate messages, which are repeating what has been said earlier in another language with the intention of making the message clearer and understood. Eldridge (1996) maintains that "messages are reinforced, emphasized, or clarified where the message has already been transmitted in one code, but not understood". In this case, the message in target language is repeated by students in their native language through which they try to give meaning by the use of repetition technique. Two reasons are given for this specific language alternation: first, the student may not have transferred the meaning exactly in target language, and, secondly, the student may think that it is more appropriate to code switch in order to make the teacher know that that content is clearly understood.

The Use of Code Switching in the Classroom

Many teachers and educators might not support the use of native language in the classroom. This might be correct if complete dialect is allowed in the classroom. But its benefits are enormous when used in the form of code switching in language learning and teaching.

Could code switching in the classroom be a good strategy to effective teaching and learning? From our knowledge of code switching, one will not hesitate to support the idea of it in the classroom teaching and learning. It is a good strategy for effective teaching when it is intentional and when both the teacher and the students use it to their advantage. For example, teachers can allow code switching when students are learning new grammar or difficult concepts but can ask students to use the target language only when they are reviewing.

But when code switching is done in excess, however, it could discourage students from communicating as much as possible in target language. After all, if their teacher can comfortably talk to them in their native tongue, why should they bother using the target language at all?

On the contrary, Cook (2002) handles the subject matter considering multilingual classrooms by saying that the application of code switching in classes which do not share the same native language may create problems. He explains further since such problems are few in number, they may be neglected. So, at this point, it may be suggested that the students should share the same native language, if code switching will be applied in instruction. This is quite correct mostly in a language class. When all the students have a common language, teachers will often switch to their native language to explain complex grammar and vocabulary, thus helping all the students in the class get a grasp of difficult aspects of the second language of study. Another point to be considered, also in this respect, is that the teacher's competence in the native language of students should be able to play a role, if positive contributions of code switching are expected.

A further discussion is put forward by Eldridge (1996) as he suggests "the learners have no guarantee that their audience will share knowledge of their mother tongue." This perspective concerns the interaction of students with native speakers of target language, as mutual intelligibility may not be possible if the learner switches his language during communication. Despite this argument, if used with care, code switching has potential to become another useful tool in our repertoire.

However, in supporting the existence of code switching in classrooms, Skiba

(1997) suggests that in the circumstances where code switching is used due to an inability of expression, it serves for continuity in speech instead of presenting interference in language. In this respect, code switching stands to be a supporting element in communication of information and in social interaction; therefore serves communicative purposes in the way that it is used as a tool for transference of meaning.

Furthermore, the functions of the teacher's code switching, as seen above, stand as a supportive explanation for the strong sides of the phenomenon. Generally, all these lead to the idea that the use of code switching, somehow, builds a bridge from known to the unknown and may be considered as an important element in language teaching when used efficiently.

We will also try to look at a few things teachers could do to manage that delicate balance between code-switching and not code-switching. First and foremost, the teacher should be clear about when code-switching is and isn't allowed. It will not be entirely realistic to embrace a "target language only" or "100% target language zone" policy in the classroom. Code-switching often happens subconsciously, so it will be unfair to both the teacher and the students to enforce consequences just because someone accidentally dropped one word in their native language one time. Instead, it would be better to set concrete boundaries around classroom code-switching. This will help the teacher use it effectively and prevent confusion or sloppiness among the students.

Additionally, the teacher should allow students to code-switch when they have difficulty continuing a conversation in the target language. Going off of the last point, this is one instance where code-switching can help rather than hinder. Using code-switching to bridge familiar and unfamiliar vocabulary can help students become more comfortable conversing spontaneously in the target language. For example, if students cannot remember one word, the teacher can allow them to substitute it with the word in their native language in order to continue the conversation. Otherwise, they may get so hung up on that one word that they lose the flow of their overall message. Afterward, the teacher teaches or reviews the missing word and discusses target language synonyms

or explanations the students might have used to get their point across without code-switching.

Conclusion:

From our discussion above, we can conclude that code switching is a common and beneficial linguistic function which, if well applied, could yield positive results in a language classroom. Students and teachers can use code switching in the classroom to meet a variety of functions such as equivalence, floor-holding, reiteration, and conflict control. Code switching happens in different areas of a sentence, before or after a clause in inter-sentential, inside a clause and non-intentional in intra-sentential and as a tag inside a clause in tag/extra-sentential.

Code switching has many benefits in education. These benefits can be creating a comfortable classroom environment, helping students learn new grammar or vocabulary, and creating effective communication with parents, students, administrators and the wider community. We have also realized that students could use code switching to show what they know or to fill gaps in their knowledge of the target language or language of the classroom.

Finally, we have seen that code switching in the classroom helps to resolve confusion or misunderstanding regarding complex grammar and vocabulary. It also makes students feel that the teacher understands their linguistic cultural background and helps them understand that they can communicate with the teacher in their native language, if necessary. This implies that code switching could be a very important strategy or method when effectively used in the classroom. This is because it is helpful for clarifying and elaborating on themes, promoting sharing in classroom, creating positive classroom rapport, and ensuring that the session runs smoothly.

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