

Teachers' Use of Code- Switching in Foreign Language Classroom

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Abstract

Code switching is defined as "going from one language to another in mid speech when both speakers know the same two languages" [1].

Code switching received interest as a specific phenomenon in foreign language teaching in 1980s, and since then there has been a heated debate on whether switching back and forth between languages, helps or hinders the student learning [2],[3].

The direct method of teaching which has been used since the 19th century emphasises that only the target language should be used[4]. Supporters of this method say that the students do not need to understand every thing that is said in the classroom, and that teaching exclusively in the target language exposes the learners to the new language functions, while using the first language deprives the learners of a valuable time, and argue that some students, may stop paying attention when the target language is used (Chambers; Halliwell & Jones; Macdonald, cited in Jingxia[2].

Researchers who advocate code switching argue that the students use of their native language allows them to express what they really want to say, and is the learners preferred strategy[1]. Studies showed that code switching can have useful functions in the classroom, such as management, and transmission of lesson content [5] and plays a role in reducing students' anxiety and lack of self confidence [6]. Stern et al reported that many students felt that failure to understand in taught language medium is caused by inadequate explanation, and argued that students relate their understanding of target language to the understanding and experiences they acquired in their native language[7], which implicates that code switching may help student's understanding of target language, and in orienting themselves in the new medium.

My aim is to discuss the good use of code switching in foreign language classroom drawing on the literature and my own teaching experience as well as highlighting some problematic issues which may associate this use.

Keywords: *Code switching, The use of L1, Second language teaching, functions, language accusation;*

Introduction

Many recent studies have provided evidence in favour of using code switching (CS) in foreign language classrooms. Although, according to Sert [8] CS is not considered favourable by many teachers, it is nevertheless important to understand its functions and benefits as a language learning strategy. Such an understanding will allow teachers to re-evaluate their position relative to the practice, and help them understand the rationale of others who adopt CS in their classrooms.

This paper first presents the main arguments against and supporting CS, explaining that CS is generally unavoidable. Then it looks at the positive functions of CS in the context of foreign language classroom, drawing on recent studies and my own experience as a language teacher.

Code switching definition

Code switching is defined as "going from one language to another in mid speech when both speakers know the same two languages" [1].

Issues and debates about code switching (CS) in the language classroom

CS first received interest as a specific phenomenon in foreign language teaching in the 1980s, and since then, disputes have surrounded the issue of whether the practice improves or lowers students' outcomes [2], [3].

Arguments against code switching (CS) in the language classroom

The use of CS in the classroom has not been widely favoured in the literature [8], [9]; however, it is practised in community contexts, where this type of bilingual talk is acceptable. In many classroom



contexts CS is viewed as inappropriate or undesirable, and a deficient mode of interaction [10]. In addition, it is still widely believed by L2 teachers that avoiding the use of L1 (first language) in the L2 (second language) classroom as much as possible is more beneficial than language mixing [11]. Consequently, teachers often insist that students use the target language (TL) and discourage students from CS [12]; thus, there is a sense of guilt present when not using the TL [13].

The direct method of teaching been used since the 19th century emphasizes that only the TL should be used to establish a direct association between experience and expression. Thus, a word or sentence and its meaning should be taught through demonstration and dramatization, without the use of the mother tongue [4]. Supporters of this method state that students do not need to understand everything that is said in the classroom (Chambers 1991; Halliwell & Jones 1991; Macdonald 1993 cited in Jingxia [2]). Furthermore, it has been argued that when a teacher chooses to use the L1 as part of the usual pedagogy in their classroom, he/she is depriving learners of classroom input in the TL [14], which for most students is the only opportunity they have to expose themselves to the language [13].

Arguments supporting code switching (CS) in the language classroom

Many scholars have questioned the monolingual norm in Foreign Language classrooms in recent years, suggesting that teachers should aim instead to “create bilinguals” [15], [16]. Swain and Lapkin [17] reported in 2000 that the use of the L1 should not be prohibited, as the L1 can be put to good use to support second language learning.

Researchers who advocate CS argue that students’ use of their native language allows them to express what they really want to say, and that it is often the learners preferred strategy [1]. Studies have shown that CS can serve useful functions in the classroom [3], [11], such as enhancing students’ understanding and providing them with an opportunity to participate in the discussion [3] management, and transmission of lesson content [5]. Moreover, it can play a role in reducing students’ anxiety and addressing lack of self-confidence [6]. For example, Stern et al [7] reported that many students felt that their failure to understand the taught language medium is caused by inadequate explanations. They further argued that students relate their understanding of the TL to the understanding and experiences they acquired in their native language [7], which implicates CS may advance student’s understanding of TL, orienting them more effectively relative to the new mode of communication. It builds a bridge from the known to the unknown and can be considered an important tool in language teaching when used effectively [8]. It can also provide a smooth transition between the two languages [6], and thus, denying students access to their L1 deprives them of the option to use an invaluable cognitive tool [17].

Cook called for a reconsideration of the view that the first language should be avoided in the classroom by teachers and students, and insisted that treating the L1 as a classroom resource allows examination of how it can be used effectively; i.e. for teachers to convey meaning, explain grammar, and organize the classroom, whilst for students it can be integrated into collaborative learning and individual strategy use. The L1 can be a useful tool in creating authentic L2 users, rather than something to be shunned [15].

Moreover, the results of a survey of language teachers’ attitudes to and use of the TL in Queensland, Australia indicate that many teachers view the learners’ L1 as an appropriate medium for clarifying cross lingual, cross-culture comparisons [18]. Other results of a survey of language teachers found that although teachers are largely unaware of using or permitting L1, and even consider it inappropriate for use in ESL classrooms, their study shows some useful functions of CS [5].

Butzkamm [19] argued that L1 is the greatest asset people bring to the task of foreign language learning, as it provides a Language Acquisition Support system, given that using the L1 helps us to learn to think, communicate and acquire an intuitive understanding of grammar.

Inevitability of CS in the language classroom

There is a sizeable body of literature on the pedagogic value of classroom CS, and yet, surprisingly, official attitudes have tended to remain negative [9]. Moreover, CS practices in the language classroom should be viewed differently according to context; especially when teachers know it is inevitable, as when teachers and students share the same L1[1]. Studies suggest that not only does CS happen in the classroom, but teachers find to their surprise and dismay that they are using far more L1 than they would like, as in the case of teachers of English as a second language in Jaffna (Sri Lanka) [5]. More teachers realized this when they were pointed towards such instances in recorded data. They emphasized that based on their training and preferences they would prefer to



use English exclusively as the medium of communication in the classroom [5]. Nevertheless, interestingly, teachers usually apply CS automatically and unconsciously in most language classrooms [6], [9], [10], which means teachers themselves might not always be aware of the outcomes and functions served by the CS process [8].

The above findings support the belief that CS is a natural phenomenon in settings where interlocutors share two language, so teachers should not necessary discourage it [1]. Arguably, as Turnbull [20] suggests, teachers should maximize the use of the TL in the classroom, but without making the judgment that L1 is harmful in some way. Nevertheless, either consciously or subconsciously, inevitably or not, CS necessarily serves some basic functions that might prove beneficial in language learning environments [8].

Functions of CS

The L1 can fulfil many functions in the L2 classroom, and these have been extensively studied [2], [3], [5], [11]. Bilgin and Rahimi [6] conducted a study that involved interviewing teachers from Turkish universities. They reached a conclusion about the functions, manners, reasons and contributions of CS as it effects the process of English language teaching from the perspective of Turkish universities teachers. The common view of all the instructors was that it serves as a facilitator, since it helps students comprehend the instructions and meanings of new words, as well as fostering their involvement in the learning process within a relaxing environment, providing them with a feeling of relief, by accessing the familiarity offered by the native language.

Sert [8] suggest that the most commonly observed functions of CS are:

- To support grammar instruction;
- To build solidarity and intimate relations with students (creating a supportive language learning environment in the classroom); and
- To repeat information given in the TL (whereby the teacher code switches to the L1 to clarify meaning).

In their research Swain and Lapkin [17] also mention that L1 serves as a tool to helps students understand and make sense of the instructions and content of a task; to focus attention on the language form, vocabulary use, and overall organization; and to establish the tone and nature of their collaboration. They suggest that without the use of L1, the task presented to the students might not have been completed as effectively.

The majority of the above findings of the functions of CS in the classroom, if not all, fall under Canagarajah's [5] two broad categories. He obtained the data for his study through observations of classroom teaching by 24 teachers in Jaffna, and he grouped these functions into two broad categories.

CS for classroom management, that includes: Opening the class, requesting help, managing discipline, teacher encouragement, teacher compliment, teacher commands, teacher admonition, mitigation, pleading, and unofficial interactions.

CS for content transition, this includes: Review, definition, explanation, negotiation of cultural difference, parallel translation, and unofficial student collaboration. Canagarajah [5].

Ferguson [9] also suggests that there are similarities in the study findings, which explore the function of CS in different classroom contexts. He grouped these functions into three broad categories. Two are the same as that proposed by Canagarajah [5]; there is also CS for curriculum access and CS for classroom discourse management, and the third category added was CS for interpersonal relations: the "classroom is not only a place of formal learning but also a social and affective environment in its own right, one where teachers and pupils negotiate relationships and identities"[9].

It is also relevant to mention here the new concurrent approach, which is a teaching method developed by Rodolpho Jacobson, which also echoes the categorizations proposed by Canagarajah [5]. it helps teachers to balance the use of both languages within a single class; this includes CS when concepts are important, when students are becoming distracted, or when students need to be praised or admonished, and when revising lesson content previously presented in the L1[1]. This approach is believed to be the most fully developed form of bilingual instruction Faltis [21], although it was designed for classes of Spanish children, being taught English.

Conclusion

With respect to all the points mentioned above, it is crucial to stress that teachers should maximize their use of the TL in the language classroom. However, this does not mean that CS impedes

language learning; in fact, it can be considered a useful practice during classroom interactions and can serve diverse and useful functions.

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