A Tentative Analysis of Code-Switching in College Bilingual Education

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Abstract

The study sets out to investigate the issue of teacher code-switching and its implications for college bilingual education. This paper examines the purposes and reasons of code-switching and how code-switching is used as a communicative strategy in a bilingual teaching classroom.
Key words: Code-switching; Bilingual teaching; Case study

INTRODUCTION

Code-switching is, as Bokamba (1989, p. 278) defines, the mixing of words, phrases and sentences from two distinct languages or varieties of the same language within the same speech event. Cook (1991, p. 63) defines the term code-switching as "Going from one language to the other in mid speech when both speakers know the same two languages". As a language phenomenon and activity, code-switching is referred to two different languages alternatively used by bilinguals in the same or different speech settings, code-switching is an unavoidable result of language contact and interaction.

Code-switching is an important issue both in bilingual education and in mother tongue use. So, in the classroom environment, the classroom itself is also a code-switching situation if the teacher knows the language of the students. Studies reveal that teacher code-switching, both in teacher-led classroom discourse and in teacher-student interaction, is a complicated language use serving a variety of pedagogical purposes.

Code-switching in bilingual teaching may include the following methods: creating desirable atmosphere, translating literature, explaining instrument introduction, writing simple science paper, having seminar reports, setting up network blackboard etc. With its wide coverage and high flexibility, the new bilingual teaching model appeals to students at very different levels in university. Character of undergraduates can be exhibited through this model and students can be encouraged to work with confidence.

1. LITERATURE REVIEW

In the past few decades, researchers had covered different perspectives on the study of code choice and code-switching. The studies on code-switching have generally been analyzed in terms of (a) the linguistic constraints that determine the form taken by code-switching (Romaine, 1995; Sánchez, 1983) and code-switching's structural patterns (Muysken, 2000), and (b) the sociolinguistic functions, which determine when, with whom, and why code-switching takes place (Adendorff, 1996; Grosjean, 1982; Myers-Scotton, 1995; Tay, 1989).

The researchers examined the various strategies used by switchers as well as the impact of the switching behavior on people's speech. Code-switching is viewed as a linguistic advantage of communicating solidarity or affiliation with a particular social group. The history of code-switching research in socio-cultural linguistics is often dated from Blom and Gumperz's (1972) "Social meaning in linguistic structures" (e.g., Myers-Scotton, 1993; Rampton, 1995; Benson, 2001). These studies address not only grammaticality of sentences but also their usage, or acceptability, with reference to the functions of

language; thus, the contexts in which either language is employed provide explanations of code-switching.

In recent years, code-switching in language classroom has come into focus as an area of specific interest and investigation (Jacobson, 2001). Foreign language classroom has become one of the specific code-switching contexts. Researchers have carried out studies on classroom code-switching in a broader variety of language environment. Some researchers (for instance, Guthrie, 1984; Merritt *et al.,* 1992) have investigated both classroom talk and the role of code-switching. They have conducted extensive observations of classroom interaction and carried out close analysis of classroom language. This paper presents the results of a tentative analysis of code-switching in college international trade classrooms of an experimental bilingual education project.

2. A CASE STUDY

2.1 Research Design

Code-switching is an interesting phenomenon in bilingual environment as well as a very common aspect in foreign language learning/teaching process. In China, most research on teacher code-switching has originated in context quite different from EFL classroom. English is taught in China mainly as a subject at school and seldom practiced in the broad social environment. Most English teachers are native speakers of Chinese, and they vary considerably in terms of their mastery of the English language. In particular, we should bear in mind that these foreign language teachers perhaps should not be regarded as true bilinguals who can choose freely between different codes or languages. More accurately, they are monolingual individuals who have skills and knowledge in a foreign language and whose task is to teach this language to the monolingual learners. When English serves both as a content subject and also as the means of instruction in English language teaching classrooms, comprehension and communication in English can be a barrier for many foreign language learners. Foreign language teachers are frequently observed to employ the alternation of the mother tongue and the target language, i. e., code-switching.

This study focused on the use of code-switching and its implications for college bilingual education. We designed questionnaires to elicit responses from respondents. We also attended lessons and took notes of classroom interactions between the teachers and the students. This design enabled us to be able to identify the languages used in specific classrooms; we were also able to analyze the features of these languages and discuss their implications on the teaching and learning of international trade.

The data for the study were obtained from 2 teachers and sixty students through observation and structured interviews. This study aims at investigating teacher code-switching between English and Chinese in bilingual teaching classrooms, with a hope to raise EFL teachers' awareness of their actual use of code-switching in classroom.

2.2 Data Collection

Data for this study were gathered through interviews and participant observation. The interviews contained questions regarding language use in bilingual international trade classrooms. A teacher of international trade and ten students, five boys and five girls, were interviewed. The teacher's interview included the following questions (1) what language(s) they usually use during international trade lessons and why they use it/them, (2) whether they code switch or not, (3) why they code switch if they do, and (4) what they think are the implications of using code-switching as a communicative strategy in the classrooms. The students' interview contained questions regarding their preference for or against code-switching and the reasons for their preferences.

The data is collected from a series of classes presented by college English instructors. Episodes of teachers' code-switching are pointed out and then transcribed. The linguistic features of teacher English-and-Chinese code-switching are put forward. Data were collected through videotaping of conversations between bilingual teachers and students.

2.3 Data Authentication

To ensure that the respondents give authentic responses, we sat in international trade classroom. In the course of each period, we observed and kept a record of classroom practices concerning language use. After each period and interview with the students involved, we made a comparison and contrast of their responses with what actually took place in the classroom. This is a way of making the study feasible and authentic.

2.4 Procedure for Data Analysis

We consider how code-switching as a conversational strategy and an interpersonal strategy can help achieve various socio/pragmatic purposes in general. Examples of teacher's code-switching can easily be identified through an observation of the bilingual teaching classrooms. We examined all the materials and also transcribed episodes of teacher' code-switching, meanwhile, we analyzed the features of the languages and discussed their implications on the teaching and learning of international trade. It provides a qualitative analysis of its linguistic features and the reasons for its occurrence.

Data collected were analyzed using Myers-Scotton's Matrix Language Framework model, as well as descriptive and inferential statistics. By means of qualitative data analysis, we concluded that code-switching could be brought about and shaped by the relationship of the teacher-student and by cultural features embedded in the Chinese language. According to the results, teachers in

the classrooms used code-switching as an approach to the acquisition of literacy, because it allowed each student to use each of his/her languages in a natural, meaningful way when the various classroom activities were being carried out.

We give special focus on the ways that teachers and learners selected each other's language choices in their classroom conversations. On the basis of the study, we found out the teachers' switches were clearly motivated by their concerns to facilitate comprehension. One of the teachers in the study puts it this way: "Sometimes I have to be bouncing from one language to the other.... but that is the only way sometimes they will understand".

A remarkable notice indicates that even when teachers used the first language for their initiations, students sometimes do use English in their replies. It shows that code-switching in such settings could happen from the Chinese to English as it happens the other way around. According to the results of a study undertaken to provide data relevant to the development of a model of bilingual speech production, they indicated that the occurrence of the language switches turned out to be relevant to the learners' proficiency in English (Poulisse & Bongaerts 1994, p. 128). Consequently, these results support the previous notice and justify it. That is to say they are related to improvements in learners' abilities to produce English.

2.5 Discussion and Possible Implications

In the bilingual teaching classroom, the teachers want to ensure that students with limited and varied English proficiency understand the teaching points at the same time they may achieve considerable efficiency. Teacher code-switching has been identified in both academic and non-academic content. By analyzing code-switching in functional terms, however, a major problem is that many switches may be either multi-functional, or open to different functional interpretations. This study only offers a tentative analysis of the reasons for teacher code-switching between English and Chinese in the classroom. Summarizing the results of the tentative analysis, we may say that teacher code-switching in bilingual teaching classroom may arise out of one or more of the following reasons:

Martin Jones (2000), in her survey article of bilingual classroom interaction, examines classroom-based research studies in the area of code-switching. Among these reasons are the following:

•To signal the transition between preparing for a lesson and the start of the lesson.

• To specify a particular addressee.

• To distinguish "doing a lesson" from talk about it.

• To change footing or make an aside.

• To distinguish questions from a written text from talk about them.

• To bring out the voices of different characters in a narrative.

• To distinguish classroom management utterances from talk related to the lesson content.

By analyzing the functions of teacher's code-switching, we clearly realized its nature as a communicative strategy. The study concludes that: (1) Compared to Chinese, English is more intrusive in the classroom; (2) Due to teachers' different expectations of students to communicate in the target language, the amount of code-switching by teachers may also vary; and (3) the contrast between the patterns of teacher code-switching during the language lessons may be signaling to students that English functions more efficiently than Chinese for "important" messages in the classroom.

We noticed that while teachers are explaining new vocabulary or grammar points, they often code switch to translate or elaborate the important message instead of continuing in English. This method makes it easier for students to concentrate on the core message conveyed and reduces the overall comprehension burden. As a result, by switching to Chinese, the smooth flow of classroom interaction and communication is achieved; meanwhile teacher's solidarity and expression of emotional understandings can also be maintained.

However, to a certain extent some people believe that code-switching hinders proficiency in English and interferes negatively in the process of acquisition. This belief even sometimes comes from teachers for whom code-switching is an essential tool. They feel guilty for their actions of switching and admit their wishes for not doing so. Although some people hold the belief that bilingual education may cause the language interference, from my perspective, bilingual education has the positive effects on second language learning. As to the advantages of using code-switching in the teaching or learning process and its contribution to the successful acquisition of English, firstly students are provided with sufficient input in the two languages for them to derive grammatical and lexical information. Secondly, students with different language proficiencies are enabled to focus on learning the concepts being presented. Thirdly, within the classroom setting, it provides a way of establishing equal prestige for both English and Chinese, which contributes to encouraging a balanced distribution of the two languages. We may safely come to the conclusion that the switches made by the teachers kept the students on task and therefore made a contribution to the accumulation of academic learning time.

In many cases, it is necessary for teacher to switch code to translate newly introduced language points, especially for learners with a limited command of the target language. Atkinson (1987, p. 426) also warns that excessive use of code-switching for translation is likely to result in negative effects. In addition, whether it is particularly necessary or not, some habitual practice of translating of the content of the instruction from English to

Chinese would make the classroom language monotonous and redundant. Obviously, this may not be an advisable practice. Last but not least, code-switching is used mainly as a transition language teaching technique to eventually all specific instruction, along with the improvement of students' level of proficiency, communication in the bilingual teaching classroom should take place in English as much as possible.

CONCLUSION

This study represents an attempt to make contributions to a better understanding of teacher code-switching in a bilingual teaching context. Some suggestions are offered about the use of code-switching in the teaching of English as a second language. Findings in this paper are going to open new aspects of study for researchers to examine, for instance, the relevance of code-switching as a learning resource in college bilingual education. Hopefully, this study can help arrive at a better understanding of teacher code-switching phenomenon and contribute to developing an appropriate attitude towards its use in the bilingual teaching classroom.

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