

## To Switch or Not to Switch:

### Examine the Code-switching Practices of Teachers of Non-English Majors

#### CHANGER OU NE PAS CHANGER:

#### EXAMINER LES PRATIQUE DE L'ALTERNANCE DE CODE DE L'ENSEIGNEMENT DE L'ANGLAIS POUR LES ÉTUDIANTS NON-ANGLOPHONES

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**Abstract:** The paper analyzes the factors of teachers' English/Chinese code-switching in EFL teaching for non-English majors. It also interprets the collected data so as to raise EFL teachers' awareness of their actual use of code-switching in classroom and help them develop an appropriate attitude towards its role in EFL teaching.

**Key words:** code-switching; function; classroom discourse; EFL teachers

**Résumé:** Le document analyse les facteurs de l'alternance de code anglais / chinois des enseignants dans l'enseignement de l'anglais pour les étudiants non-anglophones. Il analyse également les données recueillies afin de sensibiliser les enseignants de l'anglais à l'utilisation réelle de l'alternance de code dans la classe et de les aider à développer une attitude adéquate vis-à-vis de son rôle dans l'enseignement de l'anglais.

**Mots-clés:** alternance de code; fonction; discours en classe; enseignants de l'anglais

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Code-switching, which may be briefly defined as the alternate use of two or more languages in the same utterance or conversation (Grosjean, 1982; Milroy & Muysken, 1995). Code-switching includes the use of complete sentences, phrases, and borrowed words from another language (Brice & Brice, 2000). It has attracted much attention in EFL classroom in the past few decades.

Teacher code-switching is a quite common occurrence in Chinese EFL classrooms. A switch in code can convey important meanings over and above the referential meaning. Because the English proficiency of non-English majors is different from that of English-major students, teachers' code-switching between English and Chinese occurs inevitably more often in EFL teaching for non-English majors. Teachers' code-

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switching in this study is defined as a kind of unmarked linguistic choice and a teaching strategy that can be exploited by EFL teachers to achieve some specific teaching goals.

## **2. LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **2.1. Code switching and its taxonomy**

Largely out of linguistic and syntactic consideration, code-switching has been divided into two types, i.e., inter-sentential and intra-sentential (Brice, 2000). Code-switching in its narrow sense (namely, inter-sentential CS) is used to refer to the language switch across sentence boundaries while intra-sentential code mixing occurs when the language alternation is produced within a sentence (Grosjean, 1982). In the present study, code-switching is used as a broad cover term and code mixing is used to refer to language alternation within the sentence boundary.

### **2.2. Matrix language framework model**

In the FL teaching context, Myers-Scotton's Matrix language framework model can be applied to describe two kinds of switch: the switch to native language (NL) or foreign language (FL) at the sentence boundary, followed by one sentence or a stretch of several sentences in NL or FL (inter-sentential code-switching), or the switch to NL or FL within a FL or NL sentence (intra-sentential code-switching) (Rolin-Ianziti and Brownlie, 2002).

Concerning the intra-sentential code-switching, her model holds that in intra-sentential code-switching, one language acts as a dominant or matrix language and the other as a subordinate or embedded language. The basic word structure of the matrix language determines the morphosyntax of the code-switched sentence. In other words, the matrix language plays the main role in setting the sentence frame where the code-switching arises and the embedded language material is considered as having been inserted in a matrix language frame.

## **3. THE FUNCTIONS OF TEACHERS' CODE-SWITCHING**

In recent years, foreign language classroom has become one of the specific code-switching contexts. Language teachers are the guides to communication, for even though other communicative guides exist, such as body language, voice, eye contact, our main reliance generally is on the spoken and written word: language. Studies suggest that teacher code-switching, whether in teacher-led classroom discourse or in teacher-student interaction, may be a sophisticated language use serving a variety of pedagogical purposes. It is employed to facilitate student comprehension at various educational levels and build their vocabulary knowledge. Teachers also code-switch to repair trouble or silence in university classes (Ustunel, 2004). Alternatively, code switching is a strategy for teachers to adapt to students' English proficiency, teaching goals, and teacher roles in a university setting in China (Yang, 2004).

Studies offering linguistic evidence based on naturally occurring classroom data provide better insight into the functions and forms of code-switching. English teachers switch between English and Chinese in at least three ways: (a) spontaneously, (b) for direct translation, or (c) intentionally. Teachers may decide on the spot when Chinese should be used and when a switching to English is appropriate in order to enable comprehension and meaningful involvement of students (Cook, 2001). More often, however, teachers are unaware of the fact that they are switching; i.e., switches are made unconsciously (Tikunoff, 1985; Ovando & Collier, 1985; Mattson & Burenhult, 1999). Nevertheless, either conscious or not, it necessarily serves some basic functions which may be beneficial in language learning environments. These functions are listed as topic switch, affective functions, and repetitive functions by Mattson and Burenhult (1999:61). In another word, the teachers switched to Chinese for revoicing, calling attention and personalisation, and in the process they acted as resources, needs analysts, and communication facilitators for their students. In order to have a general idea about these, it will be appropriate to give a brief explanation about each function.

In topic switch cases, the teacher alters his/her language according to the topic that is under discussion. This is mostly observed in grammar instruction, that the teacher shifts English to Chinese in dealing with particular grammar points, which are taught at that moment. In these cases, the students' attention is directed to the new knowledge by making use of code-switching and accordingly making use of native tongue. At this point it is also suggested by Cole (1998): "a teacher can exploit students' previous L1 learning experience to increase their understanding of L2".

As for the expression of emotions, code-switching is used by the teacher in order to build solidarity and intimate relations with the students. In this sense, one may speak off the contribution of code switching for creating a supportive language environment in the classroom.

Another explanation for the functionality of code-switching in classroom settings is its repetitive function. In this case, the teacher uses code-switching in order to transfer the necessary knowledge for the students for clarity. In this way the teacher stresses importance on the English content for efficient comprehension. However, the tendency to repeat the instruction in native language may lead to some undesired student 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 which will have negative academic consequences; as the student is exposed to foreign language discourse limitedly.

## **4. DATA SURVEY**

### **4.1 Statement of research questions**

Code-switching is very common in English learning/teaching process. One may wonder how the teachers switch codes and what specific pedagogical purposes or functions code-switching serves in EFL classroom. We need a more careful assessment of the teaching practice in order to evaluate the quality of the code-switched input and to discover the reasons for teachers to switch code in EFL classroom.

### **4.2 Material and data collection**

This study examines the use of code-switching in 6 freshman English classrooms in Qingdao university of Science and Technology. This qualitative approach attempts to describe what is actually happening in an average lesson at a college English classroom. This microethnographic study utilised in-class observations, together with field notes and audio recordings within 24 class hours. Additionally, three sets of group interviews were conducted at the end of the survey. All the 6 teachers are experienced in English language teaching. Classroom interaction indicates that students vary considerably in their English proficiency. The main language of instruction is supposed to be English and the classroom discourse is teacher-led.

### **4.3 Data analysis**

An observation of college English classrooms soon reveals that instances of teacher's code-switching can easily be identified. The study provides a qualitative analysis of its linguistic features and the reasons for its occurrence. The data analysis indicates that (a) the teachers used on average 82% of English; (b) the teachers' code-switching followed certain patterns and principles, their use of Chinese was very effective for several functions; (c) teachers' beliefs tended to affect their code-switching practices; (d) teachers' language use appeared to affect students' language behavior in class, although students' decisions on what language to use often depended on the question's complexity and level of difficulty; and (e) curriculum guidelines seemed to affect teachers' language use, but factors like teachers' beliefs and teaching contexts might severely mitigate their impact.

In EFL classroom, one of the teacher's essential concerns is to ensure that students with limited and varied English proficiency understand the teaching points while achieving considerable efficiency. The data shows that code-switching is used in a classroom setting to perform a number of different pragmatic speech functions. Most frequently, code-switching took the form of loanwords inserted into speech for emphasis, economy of speech, and as substitute when no equivalent existed in Chinese. Less frequently, code switching was triggered by the need to attain emphasis, and to gain attention and efficiency from the

students, fulfilled by the pragmatic functions of proper name, hesitation, quotation, and transfer of subconscious markers. Briefly, the major reasons for teacher code-switching are: (a) owing to teacher's linguistic competence and insecurity; (b) for ease of expression; (c) for translation of unfamiliar words and expressions; (d) for repetitive functions; and (e) for socializing functions.

The data has shown that in EFL teacher speech, code-switching exhibits specific linguistic and functional features. Linguistically, inter-sentential code-switching (for example, "You should set a plan and work for it. Zuò shì yīng gāi yǒu jì huà") is more evident than intra-sentential codeswitching ( for example, "He looked at the menu and ordered Sì xǐ Wán zǐ" ). Because translation of unfamiliar words and expressions is more likely to involve intra-sentential code-switching, while repetitive functions more likely to involve inter-sentential code-switching. In most cases, code-switching, be it inter-sentential or intra-sentential, serves one or another functions.

#### 4.4 Linguistic features of teacher code-switching between English and Chinese

It is noticed from the data that in some classrooms, code-switching has occurred with a relatively high frequency. We have collected 187 instances of code-switching in the transcribed episodes. Further examination reveals that the majority of teacher code switching takes place across sentence boundaries. Table 1 shows the percentages of the inter-sentential and intra-sentential code-switching.

Table 1

	Number (N)	Percentage (P)
Intra-sentential CS	42	22.5%
Inter-sentential CS	145	77.5%
Total	187	100%

Further examination of Intra-sentential code-switching reveals that it mainly occurs at lexical and phrasal level. And these lexical items and expressions all fit well into the matrix language structure. The high frequency of lexical and phrasal code-switching seems to be due to the fact that lexical items and phrases are short, usually carry a relatively complete unit of meaning, which should be emphasized in the teaching/learning process or the equivalents of which are not readily available in the other language involved. Most inserted words and phrases in the present study belong to the categories of noun (noun phrases), adjective, verb and occasionally, adverb. But these categories do not share the same frequency. The switching of noun and noun phrases in the subject or object position is predominant in the data, which is in agreement with the findings of similar studies on code switching (Brice, 2000; Wu, 1985)

From the analysis of reasons for teacher code-switching, we may conclude that code-switching represents one of the strategies that EFL teachers often use to accommodate the students' level of English proficiency. In fact, the questionnaire statistics demonstrate that more than 60 percent of students take a positive attitude towards teachers' code-switching in English teaching. Teachers often code switch to translate or elaborate the important message during the process of explaining new vocabulary or grammar points. It reduces the overall comprehension burden and makes it easier for students to concentrate on the core message conveyed. Teacher's maintaining of solidarity and expression of emotional understandings by switching to Chinese also contributes to the smooth flow of classroom interaction and communication.

Finally, the directionality of code-switching is examined and calculated. Since the main language of instruction is English, the majority of the switches 78.6% take place from English to Chinese, with Chinese-English switches accounting for about 21.4%, as presented in table 2. Further detailed observation also shows that intra-sentential CS and inter-sentential CS differ in their directionality. According to table 2, English-to-Chinese switching very often takes place at sentence level while Chinese-to-English switching more easily occur within the sentence boundary. Although inter-sentential code-switching is considered as an educationally justifiable strategy (Jacobson, 1983), the use of intra-sentential code switching, however, needs to be saved only for specific teaching purposes. Excessive use of intra-sentential code-switching can make teacher's language appear broken and damage students' confidence in teacher's proficiency.

Table 2

	Intra-sentential CS		Inter-sentential CS		Total	
	N	P	N	P	N	P
Chinese to English	22	57.9%	25	16.8%	40	21.4%
English to Chinese	16	42.1%	124	83.2%	147	78.6%
Total	38	100%	149	100%	187	100%

## 5. CONCLUSION

The paper analyzes the phenomenon of code-switching by EFL teachers, particularly the functions of code-switching in English teaching classrooms are presented. With respect to all points mentioned above, it may be suggested that code-switching in language classroom is not always a blockage or deficiency in learning a language, but may be considered as a useful strategy in classroom interaction, if the aim is to make meaning clear and to transfer the knowledge to students in an efficient way. In another word, the use of code-switching somehow builds a bridge from known to unknown and may be considered as an important element in language teaching when used efficiently. Meanwhile, I would advocate a more conscious and cautious use of code-switching in EFL classroom, because excessive use of code-switching for translation is likely to result in negative influences.

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