Payame Noor University

Faculty of Humanities

Department of Linguistics and Foreign Languages

TEACHERS`CODE-SWITCHING IN IRANIAN EFL CLASSES

Thesis

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the

Degree of MA in Teaching English as a Foreign Language

Advisor:

Dr Fatemeh Hemmati

Reader:

Dr Masoud Raee Sharif

By:

Mahboubeh Goudarzi

December 2010

In the Name of God

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Abstract

This study aimed at investigating reasons and functions of code-switching among Iranian university teachers in their EFL classrooms. To this end, twenty classes were observed and the teachers of the same classes were interviewed. The received answers were analyzed to find out the reasons of code-switching. The recorded lessons were transcribed and examined to discover the functions of code-switching. Therefore, the reasons were extracted from the teachers` answers during the interviews, and the functions were identified by analyzing the transcripts by the researcher. The results of the interviews showed that the teachers have had some reasons for employing code-switching. The main four reasons were: (a) for smoothing the interaction; (b) for facilitating students` understanding; (c) for maintenance of interaction; (d) for making their teaching more effective. The results of transcription analysis showed that the teachers` code-switching serve seven functions: checking vocabulary, emphasizing, grammar explanation, reiteration, friendly talking, humor, and getting students` attention. The study supports the claim that employing code-switching purposefully can be considered as a beneficial tool in language teaching.

Key Words:

Code-switching, function, bilingual education, the foreign language class

List of Abbreviations

CS …………………………………………………………………. Code Switching

FL ………………………………………………………………….. Foreign Language

SL ………………………………………………………………….. Second Language

L1 ………………………………………………………………….. First Language

L2 …………………………………………………………………...Second Language

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Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1. Background

It is common to hear bilinguals at every age and language ability mix their two languages whenever they engage in conversation with other bilinguals. By mixing the two languages, bilinguals in fact employ code-switching. The mixture involves one word, phrase, or sentence from one language which comes into the syntax of another. Code-switching (hereafter CS) is a widespread phenomenon that extends from daily conversation in bilingual communities to English as a foreign language teaching classrooms.

Although sociolinguists initially focused their attention on code-switching in conversation between bilingual adults in informal settings (Blom & Gumperz, 1972; Gumperz & Hernandez Chavez, 1971), the study of code-switching has extended to include conversation between young bilingual children (Jorgensen,1998; Zentella, 1982, 1997), as well as more formal setting such as schools (Aguirre, 1988; Benjamin, 1996) and more specifically, second and foreign language classrooms (Ludi & py, 1986; Pekarek, 1999; Nussbaum, 1990; Nussbaum & Unamuno, 2001; Unamuno, 2003). In language classrooms, CS is employed to facilitate students' comprehension at various educational levels: kindergarten (Huerta-Macias & Quintero, 1992), secondary (Flyman-Mattsson & Burenhult, 1999; Gabusi, n. d.; Rethinasamy & Johie, 2008) and university (Greggio & Gill, 2007). Teachers also use code-switching to repair trouble or silence in university classes (Ustunel, 2004). Also, 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).

Classroom code-switching has mostly been studied in second language context (Martin-Jones, 1995; Merritt et al., 1992; Canagarajah, 1995), however, some researches have been done in foreign language context (Macaro, 2001; Soderberg Arnfast and Jorgensen, 2003).

Researchers (Becker, 2001; de Mejia, 2001) have proposed that it is better for teachers to re-examine their views concerning CS in the classroom because it can be a beneficial second language learning strategy.

1.2. Statement of the Problem

As most English teachers take no account of the role that code-switching can play in the development of a second language, this phenomenon needs much better explanation, perception, and recognition for those who deal with it in instructional settings. Although this issue has been mainly addressed in terms of its linguistic and social dimensions (Aguirre, 1985; Jacobson, 1990), its use in academic settings has less been taken into account.

It is observed that teachers are usually confused about the use of the first language (L1) in the second language classroom. Teachers are traditionally told why not to use L1 in their classes, rather than when and how to use it efficiently. If teachers know ways of using both first and second languages, they may be able to help their students` acquisition of English.

According to Simon (2001), a typical feature of a bilingual language classroom is that code-switching is forbidden, or to be avoided at all costs. She states that teachers

who employ CS feel guilty of doing so, since they did not consider it as a good practice, whereas a foreign language classroom is a specific context for using code-switching.

In contrast to views on code-switching as something problematic in classrooms, Cook (2001) argues that teacher`s ability to use both the mother tongue and the target language creates an authentic learning environment. He points out that code-switching is a natural phenomenon in a setting where the speakers share two languages, so the teachers should not discourage it in the classroom. He proposes positive ways of using mother tongue by teachers in the classroom: for conveying meaning of words or sentences, explaining grammar, and organizing the classroom.

English teachers in Iran are native speakers of Persian, and they vary in terms of their mastery in English. In particular, we should bear in mind that they must not be regarded as true bilinguals who can freely choose different codes or languages. Instead, they are monolinguals who have skills and knowledge in a foreign language, English, and whose task is to teach this language to the monolingual learners.

There seems to be a lack of awareness on the part of English teachers in Iran of how, when and to what extent they can use L1 in their classrooms. Therefore, there is a need to examine teachers` code-switching behavior in an educational setting so that a more comprehensive understanding of this phenomenon can be reached.

The intension of this study was to examine the patterns of teachers` code-switching and to reveal the functionality of using L1 in the process of teaching in EFL classrooms.

1.3. Significance of the Study

Code-switching is a widely observed phenomenon in bilingual communities, which is also used in language teaching classes, either in the teachers` or the students` discourse. Despite the fact that it may appear and sound chaotic, disordered and lacking rules, linguistic and sociolinguistic scholars have pointed out that CS can be seen as a real, specific strategy for bilinguals. In EFL/ESL classes, code-switching has come to be seen as a purposeful activity. It has received special attention because of the fact that CS may occur along the entire teaching / learning process. Once the phenomenon of code-switching is better understood, teachers know how to treat and use CS in the classroom in a way that benefits bilingual students` second language development. Several studies (Aguirre, 1985, Becker, 2001; Blake and Van Sickle, 2001; Celik, 2003; de Meijia, 1998; Macaro, 2001) have shown that when code-switching is used effectively, it can act as additional strategy to enhance academic development in EFL classrooms. The use of code-switching in an academic setting, therefore, may facilitate students` acquisition of English because it is a legitimate system of communication.

In order to be used code-switching effectively, one should have at least an understanding of the functions of switching between the native language and the foreign language and its underlying reasons. This understanding will provide language teachers with awareness of this phenomenon in classroom context and will obviously lead to better instruction by dominating its use during the foreign language instruction.

Studies carried out in educational contexts around the world have shown that teachers and learners make use of CS when communicating and interacting in the foreign language classroom (Anton and Dicamilla,1999; Flyman-Mattson and

Burenhult,1999;Braga,2000;Cipriani,2001;Macaro,2001;Martinez,2001;Moreira,2001;

Bergsleithner, 2002; Turnbull, 2002; Arnfast and Jorgensen, 2003; Melo, 2005).

1.4. Research Goals

The main purpose of this study was to investigate the role and the functions of code-switching in a limited environment, foreign language classroom context. Since code-switching is used both by teachers and students; this study was focused on teachers` ways for switching to L1 during the whole process of teaching.

There are two ways of studying code-switching: a linguistic and a social approach (Winford, 2003). The linguistic approach uses sentence as the unit which is being looked at to identify the linguistic principles and constraints that control code-switching, whereas the social approach focuses on motives and social meanings of code-switching. The present study, thus, has adopted the latter way of studying code-switching. It was focused on teachers` talk in EFL classrooms to find out when and why they switch to L1. The center of attraction had been on the conversational moment when code-switching took place and the nature of the communicative activity underlying it.

1.5. Research Questions

We are used to hear switching to L1 in a foreign language classroom and rarely think about it, because it is a common occurrence in such a context. One may wonder why

teachers switch the codes, in other words, under which circumstances they employ code-switching and what specific pedagogical purposes this switching may serve in their classes. In order to provide answers to these questions, a careful assessment of teaching practice in EFL classroom context was needed to find answers to the following research questions:

Q.1. How often do Iranian university teachers use code-switching in EFL classes?

Q.2. Why do Iranian EFL teachers employ code-switching in the classroom (based on

their answers in the interview)?

Q.3. Do Iranian EFL teachers use code-switching subconsciously or intentionally?

Q.4.What functions do the switches serve in Iranian EFL teachers' speech (based

on the researcher`s observation)?

1.6. Definition of Key Terms

1.6.1. What is code-switching?

Like any aspect of language phenomenon, researches on code switching suffer from terminological confusion. Not all researchers use the same terms in the same way, nor do they agree on the area covered by terms such as code-switching, code-mixing, or code-alternation.

The term code is a relatively neutral concept of a linguistic variety. Code-switching is defined as the alternate use of two or more languages by bilinguals in the same conversation.

In the present study, code-switching was used as a broad cover term which included different forms of bilingual teachers` verbal behavior.

1.6.2. Who is a bilingual?

Researchers have proposed various definitions of the term "bilingualism", but one of the simplest one is: Bilingualism is the condition of knowing two languages rather than one. This definition is often thought to imply equivalently high levels of proficiency in both languages. However, this is actually rare. Most of bilinguals are more proficient in one language than the other. Thus, researchers accept that a person may be called bilingual even with very limited proficiency in the second language. However, bilingualism is not a unitary construct. It varies between individuals and even within individuals depending on a particular situation, the language preference, the bilingual experience, particularly the age at which the second language is acquired and the reason for becoming bilingual.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

2.1. Introduction

As the natural phenomenon of language communication, code-switching has been one of the focuses in the field of linguistic research. Linguists and educators have made their studies on code-switching as a general phenomenon or narrowed their research when it appears in a specific context, for example in the foreign language classroom. They have developed the study of code-switching by different approaches, that is, the sociolinguistic approach, the psycholinguistic approach, and the pragmatic approach. Within these subfields, the pragmatic approach is an aspect in which the analysis of code-switching has involved social, communicative, psychological and linguistic factors simultaneously. Code-switching, therefore, takes different roles in different contexts among which teachers` switching in foreign language classrooms is a very important one.

As a matter of fact, most studies on code-switching deal with natural discourse in bilingual or multilingual social contexts and only few of them focus on classroom interaction. In the following section, a brief report of studies which were conducted on code-switching in EFL/ESL classrooms is given, which provided a set of functional categories that were used in the later analysis of the data.

2.2. Related Studies

Code-switching has attracted considerable attention during the years because it "violates a strong expectation that only one language should be used at any given time"