Teachers' Code-Switching in Classroom Instructions

for Low English Proficient Learners

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Abstract

Due to the alarming signals of declining proficiency level among English Language learners in Malaysia, this study set out to learn more about the learners' perceptions of the teachers' code-switching in English Language classrooms. The objectives of this study were to investigate a)learners' perceptions of teachers' code-switching, b)the relationship between teachers' code-switching and learners' affective support   c) the relationship between teachers' code-switching and learners' learning success and d) the future use of code-switching in students' learning. The study investigated 257 low English proficient learners attending Communication 1 proficiency course in a public university in Malaysia. A set of questionnaire containing 20 items using 5-points Likert-type scale was administered to measure the presence of code-switching in classrooms, the affective support and the learning success. The study proposed two hypotheses and the hypotheses were tested using Pearson product moment correlation analyses. The study found that learners perceived code-switching as a positive strategy due to the various functions it has. There are significant relationships between (1) teachers' code-switching and learners' affective support and (2) teachers' code-switching and learners' learning success. Learners also showed favourable support for future code-switching in the English classrooms. It is strongly believed that teachers' code-switching is an effective teaching strategy when dealing with low English proficient learners.

Keywords: Code-switching, Teaching strategy, Affective state, Psychological support, Learning success

1. Introduction

English as a second language status in Malaysia has been complemented through wide use of English in the social setting as well as the education setting. Teaching of English has been greatly emphasised by the government through its ministry. In classroom practice, teachers have been instructed to teach high quality English in English Only classrooms. The second or foreign language learning can only accept the presence of high quality input in the classroom for learners' acquisition. All language classroom input must be in the target language an effective model of language use can ensure that the intended learning was successful (Chaudron, 1988; Krashen, 1988; Chi, 2000; Cook, 2001). Classroom instructions, therefore, are the most valuable experience for learners because of the limited exposures to sufficient comprehensible input from the natural environment they might get.

Hence, the declining level of English proficiency among students has brought about the need to find out how to tackle the issue. Teachers, consequently, have been employing code switching as a means of providing students with the opportunities to communicate and enhancing students' understanding. Furthermore, code switching helps to facilitate the flow of classroom instruction since the teachers do not have to spend so much time trying to explain to the learners or searching for the simplest words to clarify any confusion that might arise. According to Norrish (1997), teachers code-switch when the level of English used in the textbook or to be taught is beyond the learner's ability or when the teachers have exhausted the means to adjust his speech to the learner's level.

There are concerns regarding the falling standards of English and this can be seen from the use of English among students, including university students (Asmah, 1992). The STAR dated 23rd January 2007 reported that approximately 36,000 university graduates of 2006 could be identified as low English proficient, that is considered to be either "very limited" or "limited" English users. This phenomenon is very alarming indeed. Similarly, a significant number of low English proficient learners have to attend various English proficiency courses offered by the university during the normal semester as well as the semester break.

Awang Had Salleh (2003) has earlier expressed great concern over Malaysian learners' needs to become proficient English users in order to access knowledge and information available in English as well as to be able to communicate successfully, thus suggesting the important position the students may hold in the future. This study therefore was initiated to investigate learners' perceptions of teachers' code-switching in English language classrooms and its relationship to the learners' affective support and learning success among a group of low English proficient learners enrolled in Communication 1 English proficiency course at the university.

A number of researchers (Lai, 1996; Cole, 1998; Critchley, 1999; Schweers, 1999; Burden, 2001; Tang, 2002; Greggio & Gil, 2007) have argued that code switching can be a useful tool in assisting English language teaching and learning process. Others (like Skiba, 1997) see an opportunity for language development because code switching allows the effective transfer of information from the senders to the receivers. Though the development is minimal and slow, it is still a positive indication of the learning progress. Tien and Liu (2006) states that low proficiency students considered code-switching in their EFL classes as helpful towards gaining better comprehension especially when providing equivalent comprehension as well as giving classroom procedures

This study adopted a similar stance on the issue, particularly, when a classroom of multilingual learners has access to a common language. In Malaysia, learners have access to a common language. Malaysian learners have mastered the National Language, Malay, from their unlimited exposure inside and outside class, thus allowing the use of Malay in code-switching. Since Malay is understood by the learners of varying backgrounds, teachers through code-switching would be able to ensure the transfer of intended skills to the learners is done effectively.

Ellis (1994), Cook (2001), Richards & Rodgers (2001) and Widdowson (2003) who have been researching second language teaching and learning claim that, although exposure to the target language can ensure success, the exposure may not work in every classroom. It has been argued that English Only classroom would only lead to frustration since the input is incomprehensible to the learners (Lai, 1996; Brice & Roseberry-McKibbin, 2001; Widdowson, 2003).

Code-switching should not be considered as a sign of defect in the teacher. Instead, it is a careful strategy employed by the teachers. Code-switching should be allowed whenever necessary with some learners in specific situations (Schweers, 1999; Chick & McKay, 1999; Burden, 2001; Dash, 2002; Tang, 2002). The literature reviewed has indicated the various positive and facilitating functions of code-switching approved by both the teachers and learners such as explaining new vocabulary, relaxing the learners, explaining grammar, talking about class tasks and assessments and establishing contact with learners.

The objectives of this research are:

1) to determine learners perceptions of teachers' code-switching,

2) to determine the relation of teachers' code-switching and learners' affective support,

3) to determine the relation of teachers' code-switching and learners' learning success, and

4) to identify the future use of code-switching in students' learning.

2. Methodology

Prior to the actual survey, the questionnaire was pilot tested and the Cronbach alpha calculation approved the reliability of the instrument with a reading of .810. The actual study involved a random sampling survey of two hundred and ninety-nine (299) students taking the English Communication 1 proficiency course were selected through random sampling. All of them belonged to the low level proficiency group of learners. The students possess MUET Bands 1 and 2 when they first registered for their undergraduate programmes.

2.1 Instrumentation

The questionnaire focused on (1) the various situations the respondents believed code-switching can be used beneficially, (2) the provision of affective support in their learning, (3) the extent of learning success due to the use of code-switching in the classroom, and (5) the future use of code-switching. The questionnaire was adapted from Schweers' (1999), Tang's (2002) and Burden's (2001) studies. The questionnaire was modified to include a 5-point Likert-type scale, instead of a Yes-No answer type. This scale provides finer scale value for statistical analysis purpose.

The analysis also covered testing for correlation between variables. All the Likert Scale options have been assigned with a value ranging from 1 to 5. For Part B, 1 refers to 'almost never' while 5 refers to 'all the time' while for Parts C and D, 1 refers to 'strongly disagree' while 5 refers to 'strongly agree'. A cumulative response value of Part B was correlated with the cumulative value of Part C and Part D. These analyses were done using SPSS software version 12.0.

2.2 Hypotheses

The hypotheses of the research are:

H1. There is a significant relationship between code-switching and learners' positive affective learning state.

H2. There is a significant relationship between code-switching and learners' learning success.

3. Results and discussion

Overall, students confirmed that code-switching was used widely to perform these functions. Nearly three quarters or 74.7 percent of the respondents indicated that code-switching was used when the teachers were checking for understanding. A total of 73.5 percent of the respondents indicated that the teachers code-switch when explaining difficult concepts.

Besides that, a total of 72.7 percent of the respondents acknowledged that code-switching was used when the teachers were explaining the meaning of new words. More than 71 percent (71.2) of the respondents also acknowledged that code-switching was used when teachers were elaborating on matters pertaining to classroom management. The analysis also showed equal number of respondents, that is 70 percent acknowledged that teachers code-switched when making the learners feel relaxed and when explaining the differences between Malay and English grammar.

In addition, 68.9 percent of the respondents indicated that code-switching was used when teachers provided explanations on grammatical aspects or items as well as on the class tests to be administered. Also, a total of 68.1 percent of the respondents confirmed that code-switching was used when establishing contact with the learners. The function for which code-switching was least used was when teachers were giving instructions to complete tasks; the figure was 64.6 percent. It can be seen that code-switching was used by the teachers to perform various classroom functions. These results are similar to the various classroom or pedagogical functions in which code-switching can be best used as discovered by other researchers (Schweers, 1999; Burden, 2001; Tang, 2002).

3.1 Code-switching and learners' affective support

Overall, learners' perceptions of the presence of psychological support brought about by the teachers' code-switching were positive. When asked if they appreciated their Communication 1 teacher's use of code-switching, based on Table 1, 69.3 percent of the respondents indicated that their teachers' code-switching has made them enjoy their Communication 1 classes. Next, nearly sixty-nine percent (68.5 %) of the respondents also indicated that they felt satisfied with their learning due to the switch while sixty-eight point one percent of the respondents expressed that they were feeling more comfortable with the lessons when teachers code-switch.

Another finding is that 64.6 percent of the respondents indicated that code-switching has made them feel less tensed while 52.1 percent of the respondents acknowledged that their teachers' code-switching has assisted them in feeling less lost during the lesson.

In analysing the learners' perception of the relationship between teachers' code-switching and learners' positive affective support in learning, the result of the product moment correlation analysis (Table 2) indicated a significant correlation, $r = 0.592$. Hence, the more teachers code-switch the stronger is the learners' affective state. Therefore, there is a significant relationship between teachers' code-switching and positive affective learning state.

The study found that code-switching helped learners to enjoy their learning due to their ability to comprehend the teachers' input. The comprehensible input also allowed them to feel less stressful and to become more comfortable to learn. Once they are comfortable with the environment, without any unnecessary anxiety (Lai, 1996; Schweers, 1999; Chi, 2000; Burden, 2001), the learners are able to focus and participate in classroom practice and activities more successfully. Thus, the presence of psychological support makes learners feel more relaxed when learning the language. When they feel that they can follow the lesson, and not feeling lost, they would look forward to learning more English.

In short, teachers' code-switching is important in providing a psychologically conducive learning environment for the learners (Lai, 1996; Schweers, 1999), providing a strong foundation to learners' affective satisfaction. Exposure to code-switching at the early stages of learning allows learners (1) to gain a head start towards effective and successful learning and (2) to gradually become users of the target language (Lai, 1996; Cole, 1998; Schweers, 1999; Chi, 2000; Mattioli, 2004).

3.2 Code-switching and learners' learning success

The overall findings are shown in Table 3. Generally, the respondents perceived that code-switching has helped to ensure that they achieve their intended success due to a high percentage of respondents who were undecided in their choice. The respondents were most united when indicating that code-switching has helped them understand difficult concepts faced in their learning.

Of a total of 257 respondents, 72.4 percent of the respondents indicated that code-switching has helped them understand new words, 71.6 percent of the respondents perceived that code-switching has assisted them in understanding any difficult concepts contained in the lesson while nearly Sixty-nine percent (68.8 %) of the respondents also perceived that teachers' code-switching has helped them understand the grammar being taught. Some 67.7 percent of the respondents acknowledged that their teachers' code-switching has assisted them in learning English in the classrooms

and 67.3 percent of the respondents perceived that they were able to carry out any task assigned by the teachers when teachers code-switched.

Students perceived that their learning success was also related to the teachers' code-switching. The result of the analysis (Table 4) showed a significant relationship between teachers' code-switching and learners' learning success as indicated by the value of r = 0.620 thus indicating learners' satisfaction towards their learning. Low proficient learner can now comprehend the subject matter as well as the classroom activities they engage in.

This justifies the novel role of code-switching in enhancing learners' psychological state when attending their English lessons. Later, this would be translated into becoming more involved and responsible in their learning (Cole, 1998; Schweers, 1999; Chi, 2000; Mattioli, 2004). The anxiety-free classroom atmosphere encourages them to participate more actively in the classroom activities. Therefore, learning success requires successful provision of comprehensible input to ensure learners understand the intended content, covering new concepts, skills and vocabulary which would consequently translated into successful execution of tasks (Schweers, 1999; Chi, 2000; Tang, 2002).

In summary, learning success reflects the learners' ability to use English effectively as a result of learners' understanding of teachers' input generated through learners' successful completion of tasks or activities designed by teachers. An English Only classroom, therefore, cannot always ensure comprehensible input. Hence, code-switching by the teacher should be considered a form of teaching strategy. This form of classroom instructions fulfils the communicative aspects of the syllabus and teaching approach, by way of achieving the transfer of meaning as desired by the teaching (Skiba, 1997; Cook, 2001; Sert, 2005).

3.3 Future use of code-switching in the classroom

The analysis of learners' support for the teachers' use of code-switching in the classroom showed that over 68 percent of the respondents indicated that they would support teachers' code-switching not only in their Communication 1 classroom but also in other English classrooms with slightly over half of the respondents (50.3 percent) indicated that future code-switching would help them understand teachers' instructions and learn new words. They generally indicated that code-switching helps the learners to understand the classroom instructions, helps the learners to understand meaning of words and, ultimately, helps the learners to improve their English.

The students who opposed any future use of code-switching argued that such strategy would not help students to improve their proficiency. They also believed that English class has to be English Only. Besides that, they indicated that to teach students to learn English, teachers need to communicate in English. Despite their non-approval of future code-switching, this can be taken as a signal that they have developed sufficient level of proficiency that resulted in their rejection.

The use of code-switching is also dependent on the type of learners involved in the learning. The study has explored low English proficient learners and the results indicated that these learners approved the teachers' code-switching. This corroborates the findings of Lai (1996), Critchley (1999), Schweers (1999), Dash (2002) and Greggio and Gil (2007) that code-switching might be a helpful strategy to use in low proficient classrooms as well as the intermediate level classrooms (Critchley, 1998; Tang, 2002; Januleviciene & Kavaliauskiene, 2002).

Though the study showed favourable conclusions, there are some limitations to the study. The first is it investigated only low English proficiency students. A study on intermediate or advanced English proficiency groups of students might produce different responses since students with varying level of proficiencies would have mastered different linguistics skills and so would have required less amount of or even no code-switching from the teachers. Secondly, the results are only perceptions from the students. The actual relationships between the variables may be different than the outcome of the study. However, one positive aspect of this is that students possess the understanding that they have managed to participate successfully in their class activities which would be translated in the form of future examination success, all because of their teachers' code-switching.

Thus, in ensuring that learners possess the necessary affective support and that they succeed in their language learning, teachers can code-switch between English and Malay systematically to perform the appropriate functions. Teachers, nevertheless, need to be reminded that code-switching is a measure or a strategy to ensure transfer of comprehensible input from the teachers to the learners. Systematic use of code-switching to serve certain functions can ensure learning success. Code-switching is not an allowance for teachers to use Malay excessively whenever they want to. Code-switching should be considered as a strategy and not to be taken as a teaching method.

4. Conclusion

Overall, the results indicated that the learners have a positive perception of teachers' code-switching in the ELT classrooms. The study concluded that:

(1)   Teachers' code-switching serves various functions in the classrooms.

(2)   Teachers' code-switching is significantly associated with learners' affective support.

(3) Teachers' code-switching is significantly associated with learners' learning success.

(4) Learners support future code-switching in ELT classrooms.

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Table 1. Code-switching and Learners' Affective State

		Disapproved %	Not Sure %	Approved %
1.	It helps me enjoy my lesson.	24.5	6.2	69.3
2.	It helps me feel satisfied with my learning.	23.3	8.2	68.5
3.	It makes me feel comfortable to learn.	24.5	7.4	68.1
4.	It helps me feel less tensed.	22.1	13.2	64.6
5.	I feel less lost during the lesson.	34.7	13.2	52.1

Table 2. Correlation: Code-switching and Affective Support

	Cumulative mean value	Pearson *r*
Code-switching *	38.2179	***
Affective Support **	17.4319	0.592

* Range 10-50

** Range 5-25

*** $P \leq 0.01$

Table 3. Code-switching and Learners' Learning Success

		Disapproved %	Not Sure %	Approved %
1.	It helps me to understand new words.	19	8.6	72.4
2.	It helps me to understand the difficult concept.	18.3	10.1	71.6
3.	It helps me to understand English grammar.	20.3	10.9	68.8
4.	It helps me in learning the English language in the class.	20.2	10.9	67.7
5.	It helps me carry out the task successfully.	20.2	12.5	67.3

Table 4. Correlation: Code-switching and Learning Success

	Cumulative mean value	Pearson *R*
* Code-switching	38.2179	*** 0.620
** Learning Success	18.1946	

* Range 10-50

** Range 5-25

*** P ≤ 0.01