

Functions of Code-Switching: Tools for Learning and Communicating in English Classes

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The use of code-switching in the classroom is an issue of great importance for all educators in our country since it is a resource that teachers and students may use in order to achieve a specific communicative purpose. This article scrutinizes the teacher's and the students' speech from an interactional point of view, as well as the findings, conclusions and implications of the finished research project. Specifically, we explored which teacher's and second graders' discourse functions took place when using code-switching in English classes. In addition, this document invites educators to consider the use of the L1 as a means of learning and communicating rather than an obstacle in the teaching learning process.

Key words: Code-switching, discourse functions, interaction

El uso del cambio de código en el aula es un asunto importante para los educadores de nuestro país ya que es un recurso que maestros y estudiantes pueden usar con el fin de alcanzar un propósito comunicativo específico. Este artículo explora la interacción entre profesor y estudiantes, es decir las funciones del discurso que ellos utilizaron en el momento de recurrir al cambio de código en las clases de inglés. Asimismo, se describen los resultados, las conclusiones y las implicaciones del proyecto de investigación culminado. Por consiguiente, este documento invita a los educadores a considerar el uso del español como un medio de aprendizaje y comunicación y no como un obstáculo en el proceso de enseñanza-aprendizaje.

Palabras clave: Cambio de código, funciones del discurso, interacción

Introduction

The use of code-switching in the classroom is a debatable issue in current education practice since there are two views towards the alternate use of two languages; that is to say, there are some authors who consider code-switching as conflictive while some others see it as positive in the classroom. Concerning the negative view, Cook (cited by Sert, 2005) states that code-switching may create problems in the classroom because students may be neglected. He recommends that learners should share the same native language. However, we think this position is very idealistic due to the fact that teachers seldom have the possibility of choosing who their students are in order to teach a class which is linguistically homogeneous.

In regards to the positive view of code-switching, Skiba (1997) asserts that it “provides continuity in speech rather than presenting an interference in language” (p.2). He affirms that code-switching should be viewed as a linguistic advantage rather than an obstacle in communication. Moreover, Mejía (1998) also supports the use of code-switching in the classroom by claiming that it “helps maximize learning opportunities in the bilingual classroom” (p.9). In addition, it is important to consider what the author states about teachers’ attitudes towards the role of code-switching since we should see it as a resource rather than a problem.

Based on these two main views, we strongly believe that code-switching should be considered as positive in the classroom since it gives learners the possibility of using their L1 for communicative purposes. Additionally, we state that we, as educators, should see this phenomenon as a resource rather than a problem if we take into consideration that the interaction between teacher and students is even richer than having only grammar accuracy as a point of departure. With the purpose of examining the interaction that took place in the classroom while teacher and students code-switched, we accounted for the functions of teacher’s and second graders’ code-switching with the positive view of such discourse exchanges.

Accordingly, we took into account the functions proposed by Romaine (1989), Mattson & Burenhult and Eldridge (cited by Sert, 2005), who exhaustively explain which functions teachers and students carry out when interacting and using code-switching. In this regard, we identified throughout this research the teacher and children’s functions that took place in English classes since the “interactive rapport” was at the core of our study.

Research design

In order to describe the study we carried out, this chapter presents crucial issues that the investigation brought forward; that is, from the type of study to the process of collecting data. On the one hand, the type of research, the objectives, the research questions, the setting and the participants will be stated. On the other hand, the instruments and the process for data collection will be illustrated.

Type of study

With the purpose of answering the questions stated in this research, we carried out a qualitative case study according to Merriam (cited by Nunan, 1998), which is “an intensive, holistic descriptive analysis of a single entity, phenomenon or social unit” (p.77). Furthermore, this study was descriptive as well as interpretative when considering that, as the author states, it presents a detailed account of the phenomenon under study and contains rich and thick descriptions to collect as much information as possible in order to interpret and theorize. In our particular case, the research was conducted in such a way that we could not only describe teacher and students’ interaction but also account for the discourse functions and the communicative purposes of the use of code-switching.

Objectives and research question

The study consisted of identifying the discourse functions that took place in English classes at Gimnasio Los Andes School in Bogotá. Explicitly, we accounted for teacher and second graders’ discourse functions when using code-switching in the classroom. As we wanted to explore discourse from an interactional point of view, we focused our investigation on the purpose for which communicative agents alternated two languages in speech: Spanish and English. This research project was fulfilled by embracing the question: What does the use of code-switching tell us about teacher’s and second graders’ discourse functions in English classes?

Setting

This research took place in a coeducational private school called Gimnasio Los Andes, located in the north of Bogotá. The school is monolingual and children receive an intensified English program which is developed throughout eight hours of

communication and two hours of workshop, for a total of 10 hours of English weekly.

Participants

The students

Our investigation was carried out with learners from social strata four and five. There was a total of thirty kids who were between seven and eight years old from one second grade, which was selected by taking advantage of the fact that the English teacher was very willing to cooperate in doing this research. It is important to note that children spontaneously resorted to code-switching in English classes in order to express their ideas and feelings, convey meaning and maintain communication with their teacher and peers.

The teacher

The English teacher was male; he was a languages graduate and had taught English for about five years at the school. In addition, he was very cooperative, open-minded and willing to participate in the project. It is important to remark that the teacher was flexible in relation to the use of Spanish in the classroom since he allowed kids to switch into their L1 without hindering learning opportunities.

The researchers

Since we played the role of observers in the English classes we did not participate or carry out any kind of intervention in the classroom. On the contrary, we just observed what took place regarding the use of code-switching. With the purpose of carrying out this qualitative descriptive research, we videotaped some sessions by asking the school's and the teacher's permission.

Data collection

We made use of video tapes in order to capture the functions of teacher and second graders' code-switching because, borrowing Hubbard and Power's words (1999), "they give teachers insights into untapped aspects of their classrooms" (p.98). In other words, this instrument endowed us with the social elements taking place in

the classroom that are usually overlooked in the daily teaching practice; that is, we could analyze the dynamics of the class regarding participation, interaction and children's behavior when working in English classes. It is important to mention that we used only this instrument to collect data due to the fact that time was the main constraint for the development of the project.

The importance of code-switching in the classroom

Considering code-switching as a positive phenomenon with which to take full advantage of learning and communicative opportunities while interacting, we insist on the importance of the role of code-switching in the classroom since educators should consider it to be, as Arthur (cited by Mejía, 1998) poses, “a means of encouraging greater pupil participation (...) and not feel guilty about using their pupil's L1 in the classroom” (p. 9).

Due to the fact that Spanish was not seen as appropriate in classrooms at Gimnasio Los Andes School, we considered it of great importance to address the issue of using two languages in speech, in this case Spanish and English, since teachers and students did not use it with a negligent purpose but with a communicative aim. Thus, people outside the classroom saw the use of L1 as a problem since they considered it as an interference in children's second language acquisition process.

In this regard, we considered foremost that it was necessary to understand the fact that code-switching was not as inappropriate as it was generally viewed at the school given that, as Mejia (1998) states, we as teachers should consider “natural code-switching as a valuable tool for making meaning in the classroom, specially in the early stages of second or foreign language learning” (p.9). Considering the use of Spanish as a communicative means for interaction, we particularly examined the purposes for which the teacher and children shifted into their native language to convey meaning.

This project is an invitation to examine the role of code-switching in the classroom and, thus, change attitudes towards its use since Spanish may be considered as a linguistic “holding resource” rather than a negative interference in the language learning process. This paper is expected to have an impact on teachers' beliefs about using L1 in the classroom since the focus of the study was not structural but sociolinguistic, which might lead educational agents to see language from a perspective different from grammar issues: an interactional view.

Literature review

As this project accounted for the functions of teacher and children's code-switching in English classes, the investigation was based on two main constructs: code-switching and teacher's and students' functions. With the aim of scrutinizing such concepts, we based our work on some authors such as Skiba (1997), Romaine (1989), Sert (2005), Namba (2006), Kasperczyk (2005), Mattson & Burenhult and Eldridge (cited by Sert, 2005), among others.

Code-switching

Regarding this term, Crystal (cited by Skiba, 1997) provides us with a definition by which the author states that "It occurs when an individual who is bilingual alternates between two languages during his speech with another bilingual person" (p.1). In addition, Gumperz (cited by Duran, 1994) states that code-switching "is a discourse exchange which forms a single unitary interactional whole" (p.4). This definition is as important as the previous one, since he clearly asserts that it is more than only using two languages in an alternate way because the communication that people hold is an interactional unit which embraces a two-way discourse.

Furthermore, Mejía (1998) also sheds light on this concept by highlighting the important role that code-switching plays in the classroom. Accordingly, the author carried out an investigation with children from a bilingual school in Cali, Colombia, with the purpose of searching the ways teachers and students constructed and negotiated meaning while using code-switching (English-Spanish) in storytelling. After having conducted her study, the writer suggests that educators should use children's L1 to check concepts understanding and maximize learning opportunities in bilingual classrooms. These findings lead us to reflect upon the fact that we, as teachers, should reconsider our attitudes towards the use of code-switching; that is, if we perceive the use of the student's native language as an obstacle or as a social means for communication.

Types of code-switching

Taking into account that code switching can take place in the classroom at any moment, we considered it relevant to bear in mind the different types of code-switching that can be carried out by the students or by teachers. In this sense, Kasperczyk (2005) portrays two different types, which are *intersentential* and

intrasentential. In regards to the former, *intersentential*, the author describes this term as “the language that occurs at the sentence boundaries” (p. 1), which means that the language is shifted after the end of the sentences. In relation to the latter, the author points out that “the shift is done in the middle of the sentence, with no interruptions or pauses indicating a shift” (p.1).

We believe it was of great importance to understand the difference between both types of code-switching in order to identify which was used in the classroom and for what reasons. Although code-switching can be intersentential or intrasentential, it is crucial to bear in mind that this phenomenon can take place in the classroom no matter which subject students are taking or topic they are studying. We consider that the decision to use code-switching may vary according to the situation the speaker may encounter.

Approaches to code-switching

Namba (2006) clearly states that the studies of code-switching can be divided into three main fields: psycholinguistics, linguistics and sociolinguistics. In regards to the former, the author clarifies that each language of bilinguals can be activated or deactivated independently or simultaneously; that is, bilinguals choose which language to use according to their interlocutors. In accordance with the second field, linguistics, the writer declares that code-switching is studied in terms of universally applicable, predictive grammatical constraints. Regarding the sociolinguistic field, Namba (2006) states that code-switching is carried out at an interactional level; that is, the speaker switches languages according to the change of the situation.

Consequently, it is important to note that the sociolinguistic approach was the one that supported our project due to the fact that we intended to scrutinize code-switching from an interactional point of view in which, according to the writer, the speaker switches languages to achieve a special communicative effect.

Functions of code-switching

Sert (2005) asserts that speakers, teachers and students use interactional functions to self express, modify the language for personal intentions and intimate personal relationships among members of a bilingual community. Thus, the author exhaustively describes two types of functions of code-switching: teacher’s functions and students’ functions, which are explained below.

Functions of teacher's code-switching

Sert (2005) describes that these functions, originally illustrated by Mattson and Burenhult (1999), are topic switch, affective and repetitive functions, which are explained below.

- **Topic switch:** Teachers alter their language according to the topic.
- **Affective function:** Code-switching is used by the teacher in order to build solidarity and intimate relations with students.
- **Repetitive function:** The teacher code-switches in order to clarify meaning.

Functions of students' code-switching

The learners' functions, originally proposed by Eldridge (cited by Sert, 2005), are equivalence, floor-holding, reiteration and conflict control, which are described as follows:

- **Equivalence:** Students use the native equivalent of a certain lexical item in the target language and, thus, code-switch in the native language.
- **Floor-holding:** Students make use of the L1 in order to avoid gaps in communication since they may lack appropriate target language structures. Furthermore, the speaker code-switches due to the fact that he wants to maintain the conversation when expressing his ideas.
- **Reiteration:** The message in target language is repeated by the student in his native language through which he tries to give meaning by repetition.

In addition to these functions, Romaine (1989) also sheds light on this topic by stating that interlocutors may use two discourse functions: interjections and qualify the message. These are described as follows:

- **Interjections:** The speaker makes use of code-switching to mark interjections or to serve as sentence-filler by expressing emotion.
- **Qualify the message:** It takes place when a topic is introduced in one language and commented on or further qualified in the other. These functions were crucial for our study since we focused our attention on teacher's and students' discourse in order to account for such functions while they interacted in English classes.

The theoretical foundations presented above shed light on the purposes that teacher and second graders had for using the native language in the classroom, no matter if they did this conscious or unconsciously. Since code-switching may be used for communicative purposes, these premises helped us identify which were the most relevant functions teachers and learners used while interacting.

Data analysis

This chapter describes the process we carried out with the purpose of analyzing the information we gathered; in this case, the video tape transcriptions and answering our research question. It was a systematic procedure by which, as Hubbard and Power (1993) state, we gave “order, structure and meaning to the data to discover what is underneath the surface of the classroom” (p.65).

Furthermore, it is essential to mention that we selected *open coding* in order to start the analysis of the information gathered from the video tape transcriptions since, as Strauss & Corbin (1990) describe, this is “the part of analysis that pertains specifically to the naming and categorizing of phenomena through close examination of data” (p.62). Based on these authors’ guidelines about coding procedures, we first wrote the teacher and students’ functions on the right side of the video tape transcriptions in order to label or conceptualize data.

After having finished labeling the phenomena, we designed a visual memo with the purpose of making the coding procedure organized and start grouping the functions according to the question. To begin with, we indexed the functions in such a way that we could find the number of times they were revealed and their location, including the number of the video tape and the line. Additionally, we drew a map including the patterns that were frequently found in the video tape transcriptions to answer the research question that guided our study. This visual display was very helpful for us since we could organize the patterns in a structured way and account for the teachers’ and students’ discourse functions.

Findings

As mentioned above, the data were collected by means of video tapes since we wanted to scrutinize the teacher’s and the students’ discourse functions in the classroom. Therefore, we found the following two categories that answered the question stated in this research: “A comfortable environment allows children to

participate, negotiate and learn” and “Code-switching serves as a bridge to build up individual and collective knowledge”. The first category describes the functions used by the teacher which helped him create a comfortable atmosphere. The second category comprises children’s discourse functions through which they could express their ideas and feelings by making use of their L1.

1. A comfortable environment allows children to participate, negotiate and learn

Throughout the data analysis we observed that the teacher created a nice atmosphere in the classroom in order to clarify grammar features and convey meaning, to encourage participation, to make children feel relaxed and to negotiate classroom rules. Consequently, we found that the teacher used five discourse functions when code switching: affective, topic switch, interjections, qualify the message and repetitive.

In accordance with the *affective function*, we noticed that the teacher used nicknames, students’ name abbreviations, diminutives and tender words in order to create a friendly atmosphere in the classroom, maintain a warm relationship, encourage learners to participate and involve them in the activities proposed. The following excerpt evidences the use of this function:

T: Yeah, they can fly but they can’t walk. Pretty nice, July (V1L121)

This sample illustrates that the teacher used name abbreviations with the purpose of praising students when they gave a right answer and affirming that their answers were correct in order to motivate the learner to participate.

In relation to *topic switch*, we found that the teacher used this function in order to clarify meaning when talking about new content and grammar structures. In this sense, he made use of Spanish since he wanted the kids to understand concepts (weight) and use grammar structures accurately such as “there is” and “there are”. The following example illustrates the use of *topic switch*:

T: my pocket. What is there in my pocket? *Qué hay en mi pantalón*. Give me one second raise your hands and participate. Javier. There is (...) (V2L12).

Additionally, the teacher also used *interjections* and *repetition* in his discourse. In relation to the former, the teacher made use of expressions such as *uy* and *está cheverísimo* in order to affirm that something was correct and to encourage kids to

work. Concerning the latter, we could notice that the teacher switched from English into Spanish in order to clarify an instruction given and meanings of words. Thus, we consider he wanted to assure that all students could clearly understand the purpose of the activity and the meaning of some vocabulary by using kids' native language. This entry depicts what was previously stated:

T: listen to me this activity is very easy. In this moment I'm going to give you a copy with different animals number one you have to colour number two you have to cut and paste and organize like a map what is a map? (...) miren hijos me prestan atención por favor. Número uno están coloreando número dos presten atención un segundo para que quede claro. Tengo un problema que con ese grupo que está dando contra la pared porque o sea necesito que me miren si chiquitos por fa. Número uno colorean numero dos van a empezar a recortar los los animalitos que tienen ahí les doy una hoja aparte y ahí ustedes van a hacer como un mapa de del zoológico donde ustedes van a reunir aquatic animals you are going to separate land animals domestic animals and then you invent the name and a little description using there is there are. (V2L162-163 / 188- 193)

The use of these functions evidence that the use of Spanish has communicative and motivating purposes in the classroom since children could have access to their native language and maximize their knowledge in the bilingual context (Mejía, 1998).

2. Code-switching serves as a bridge to express emotions and build up individual and collective knowledge

Taking into account that students were provided with a comfortable environment, learners made use of code-switching in a spontaneous way so as to express their feelings towards the activities proposed, avoid gaps in communication and help others express ideas. Accordingly, we observed that students used the following functions: *reiteration, floor holding, equivalence, interjections and qualification of the message.*

In relation to *reiteration*, we noticed that kids made use of it with the purpose of conveying meaning by repeating the instruction in L1 right after the teacher's explanation and making the purpose of the activity clear for them. Thus, students translated the instruction given in English into Spanish to indicate that they understood the message.

T: you have to invent the name of the zoo
S. zoo land

T: excellent men zoo land
S: *o sea zoológicolandia*. (V2L166-169)

Regarding *floor holding*, we can state that students made use of Spanish in order to avoid gaps and maintain communication. Consequently, kids introduced some L1 words any time they did not know how to express the whole idea in the foreign language so as to make themselves understood. Regarding *equivalence*, we observed that students used their L1 with the purpose of clarifying the meaning of a word. That is to say, there were certain moments in which the teacher mentioned a word or a phrase and students repeated it in Spanish. In addition, this phenomenon took place not only between teacher and students' interaction but also among themselves.

T: do you remember what weight is? When you go and (?) my weight, the teacher's weight is 75 kilograms.
S: *peso, el peso!*
T: Ahh! Excuse me?
C: *peso!* (V1L9-14)

Concerning *interjections*, we noticed that children used this function in order to express happiness when working with their friends and getting points in contests, confirming that they knew and expressing surprise and willingness to participate. Conversely, kids used interjections so as to express to the teacher that they were not in agreement with his decisions such as deciding who could participate in a contest or any activity.

T: (he selects some other kids to play) Finally, uhm the most difficult one (referring to the fact that it is the easiest since there is only one option), Paula, concentrate, concentrate, concentrate!
S: nine and thirteen
S (one kid from the other group) ahh no teacher!! *Qué picho!* (V1L164-167)
T: Yeah. it can be the first one. Its name is elphin right? excellent Valentina come here.
S: Ay! yo quiero.
T. give me one second right? (V1L232-234).

Concerning the function called *qualification of the message*, we observed that students made use of their native language to help others complement the sentences expressed. In this regard, the students' interventions served as a trigger for others to maintain communication.

T: Give me more information about the dolphin

S: The dolphin communicate for, (...)

S: (another kid says *se comunica por chiflidos*)

T: can communicate by (...)

S: the dolphin communicate by (...)

T: whistles

S: whistles (kids begin to whistle) (V1L150-151)

The students' functions, identified through the data, revealed the importance of leaving room to the use of Spanish in a foreign language environment due to the fact that early age students are starting the process of acquiring a language in which the use of L1 is a communicative resource to convey meaning.

Conclusions

The use of code-switching in the observed classes allowed us to conclude that the teacher used different types of discourse functions such as affective, topic switch, interjections, and repetition with two main purposes: to create a comfortable environment in the classroom and to clarify information. In addition to this, we identified that the *affective function* was the most prominent in the teacher's discourse. In spite of the fact that clarification was essential in this particular setting, we observed that the affective factor was the most prominent in the teacher's practice since his particular way of addressing students accounts for the comfortable atmosphere the teacher created.

In regards to the students' speech, we discovered that learners made use of discourse functions in order to convey three types of responses: individual, group and emotional. In relation to the first one, we observed that students switched from English to Spanish to express ideas, clarify meanings of words, avoid gaps in communication and verify the teacher's information. Consequently, the students mainly used reiteration, floor holding and equivalence when giving individual responses. Regarding the group response, we observed that they collaborated with each other in order to help others speak, complement what peers said and avoid misunderstandings by means of qualified messages. According to the emotional response, it was interesting to observe that children made use of interjections any time they wanted to express happiness, disagreement, surprise and willingness to participate in the activities proposed.

Furthermore, the alternate use of English and Spanish in this specific context evidenced the use of intersentential and intrasentential code-switching in both teacher and students' discourse. Regarding teacher's interaction, we observed that the shift into Spanish took place at the end of the sentences (intersentential) in order to make his questions clear for kids, clarify his instructions and focus on oral accuracy for kids to pronounce correctly. In addition, the teacher code-switched in the middle of the sentences (intrasentential) so as to clarify the meaning of words, give additional information about the activity and talk about the importance of fulfilling discipline arrangements in class.

In accordance with children's discourse, we observed that they used intersentential code-switching to reply the teacher's questions and made use of intrasentential shift in order to describe their pieces of work in front of the class. Consequently, learners evidenced that they employed intersentential code-switching when the discourse was unidirectional; that is, teacher's question and student's reply, while they only used intrasentential code-switching when they were the center of the discourse.

Pedagogical implications

Due to the fact that this investigation was developed with kids between seven and eight years old, we consider it essential that teachers should not only focus their discourse on clarifying information but also on creating a comfortable atmosphere in the classroom. To be specific, educators may use learners' native language so as to elucidate language features and let participants shift into their L1 for them to feel more motivated and willing to take an active role in the interaction. Moreover, this project makes us reflect upon the fact that sometimes the teacher may unconsciously use Spanish during English classes with positive purposes such as enriching students' learning process and establishing a dynamic social rapport.

Thus, we consider the use of L1 should not be seen as an obstacle in the students' learning process but as a tool they may use in the process of acquiring a foreign language since L1 use may trigger individual and collective responses in the construction of meaning. Accordingly, the educational community, including educators and coordinators, should see the native language as a resource rather than a problem since parties, teacher and students, may shift into their L1 to feel part of a group, be involved in the social dynamics of the classroom and build up social learning. In stead of forbidding native language use in some contexts, the educational

community should take it as a point of departure to exploit the foreign language acquisition in which learners may empower their own language knowledge to convey meaning and enhance both cognitive and social skills.

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