

The Impact of Code switching on English Language Learning



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Abstract: Classroom code switching is a common scenario in many multi lingual and multicultural classes. Classroom code switching has some distinctive attributes. As a part of the global transformation in the methods and techniques of English language teaching, we need to consider classroom code switching as a fact which cannot be ignored in any way especially in a country like Pakistan where English is taught as a foreign language. In most of the cases students tend to switch codes, but it is also common in teachers' discourse. This paper aims to focus on the reasons for teachers' code switching and the attitude of the teachers and students towards classroom code switching. A survey was conducted for data collection where two different sets of questionnaires were used for teachers and students. 20 English language teachers and 37 undergrad students from different universities participated in the survey. The findings of the survey result in identifying the reasons for teachers' code switching like ease of communication, explanation, maintaining discipline in the classroom, translation of the unknown terms etc. On the other hand, although many teachers consider that they should not switch codes in the class room, students possess a positive attitude towards it.

Keywords: Code switching, ESL, EFL, Monolingual, Class Room

Introduction

Code switching is a debatable issue in EFL classroom discourse. The old and new English language teaching methods starting from the Grammar-Translation Method up to the Communicative Language Teaching have specific rules regarding the classroom language usage for both teachers and students. Some approaches support the mother tongue interference whereas others consider it as a 'taboo' considering that it may hamper the foreign or second language acquisition. Code switching, i.e. , alteration between two

languages in the same discourse is a common phenomenon in the present day multi lingual language classrooms where English is taught and grammatical rules are explained with the help of the native language and where English is the predominating language and other languages function as supportive or secondary elements in explanation and comprehension. But in case of monolingual countries where English is used and taught as a foreign language the scenario is different from that of the multilingual countries. English has a growing demand here and being a part of the global community the necessity and importance to learn English is felt more and

more and day by day.

English is taught as a compulsory course in primary, secondary and higher secondary levels. At the undergraduate level English is included as a compulsory course for the non-English major students studying in both public and private universities. In the public universities, the mode of instruction is English for these courses, but for other courses there is no specific instruction from the university authority regarding classroom language usage. On the other hand, in private universities the medium of instruction is English which an obligatory rule is for the teachers even taking other courses. But sometimes, even in the private university classroom discourse we find mother tongue interference as a common fact. This phenomenon creates scopes for classroom code switching. The aim of this study is, therefore, to investigate:

- **Why do the teachers switch codes in classroom discourse?**
- **What attitude do the teachers and students possess towards classroom code switching?**
- **Classroom Code Switching: A Brief Overview**

Codes switching in regular social context and code switching in language learning classroom have separate and distinct functions though sometimes some functions are common in both the situations.

During the 1970s and 1980s classroom code switching was not viewed or analyzed seriously, rather in ESL /EFL classrooms students were obliged to use the target language within the classroom for any kind of communication. As classroom based research started to develop during the 1990s, so classroom language interaction started to gain priority in those researches, and classroom code switching started to gain importance in language learning classes .Debate and controversy are continuing till the present day on the idea regarding whether code switching is a meaningful tool or not in case of second/ foreign language learning. The language teachers and policy makers in support of classroom code switching in EFL classes

consider that it assists in the continuity of the speech; it serves as a tool for transference of meaning and serves communicative purpose. On the other hand, participants who oppose the use of code switching in classroom language learning and teaching consider that it is mother tongue interference which obstructs the learning environment. In case of regular code switching by the teacher, the students become less interested in listening to the target language and gains low proficiency. In the Grammar Translation Method, which is considered as one of the oldest methods in English language learning, students' native language is used as the medium of instruction (Richards & Rogers 1986¹). In Direct Method and Oral Approach there is no use of mother tongue or the first language. In Audio-lingual Method native language usage is limited

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Classroom Code Switching: Public VS Private Universities

English is a compulsory course in the syllabic designed for school, college and university level. At the tertiary level the number of English courses offered for the non-English major students differs from university to university. In the public universities the non-English major students are offered one or two compulsory English courses, whereas, in the private universities the students need to do two to four English courses. Moreover, in most of the public universities the mode of communication is both English and Pashto in many departments. But in the private universities both the teacher and the students have to use English mandatory for in-class communication. Thus in a monolingual society the bilingual environment is created in the university classrooms. So we can understand that classroom code switching is an observable fact in the public universities. In private

universities, it may apparently seem that there is no scope for code switching in the classroom, but in reality classroom code switching occurs, though on rare occasions. One of the major reasons responsible for this is that a large number of students come from the Pashto medium background who at their secondary and higher secondary levels had very little chance to use English. So, the teacher sometimes feels obliged to break the code imposed by the university authority and use the mother tongue. Aichun, L. (2003⁵) points out another reason,

"Perhaps code switching is inevitable in the classroom if the teacher and students share the same languages".

The Study and Data

The purpose of the article is to find out the reasons responsible for the teachers' classroom code switching. This paper also tries to investigate how the teachers and students perceive code switching, i.e. what is their attitude towards classroom code switching. A survey was conducted on 20 English language teachers and 37 students from different Departments at AWKUM with two different sets of questionnaires. The responses are shown in percentage.

The Participants

Two groups of participants took part in the survey. The teachers, who are teaching English language courses in different public university AWKUM, were in one group. The second group consists of the tertiary level students studying in different universities and among them some are English-major students and some are non-English majors. The teachers' university teaching experience varies from 3 to 15 years. A total of 37 students participated in the survey from AWKUM, 8 students are from Biology Department, 10 students are from Social Science department, 6 are from English Department and 4 are from Economics Department. All of them have completed their 1st year, i.e. at least 3 trimesters in their university life.

Data Collection Instrument

For collecting data, two separate sets of questionnaires were designed and distributed

among the two distinct groups. In the questionnaire designed for the teachers, some questions are included that presuppose some obvious reasons for teachers' classroom code switching. These questions are included to justify and verify whether the assumed reasons are true or not, which received strong support from the teachers. Some questions are designed to evaluate what kind of attitude the teachers possess towards their own and towards the students' code switching. An open ended question is included to find out some more reasons for teachers' code switching which has given an additional value to this research. The second set of questionnaire, designed for the students, has basically one aim: what is the students' attitude towards their teachers' code switching. The responses collected from the students reveal that though most of the teachers perceive code switching negatively, students consider that code switching is a positive thing and it helps their comprehension of the target language.

Results

This section discusses reasons for code switching, the influence of the number of students and their background that compel the teacher to switch codes, the influence of code switching in gaining proficiency in English and the mixed attitude of teachers and students towards code switching.

Reasons for Classroom Code Switching

Class size and maintaining discipline: In kpk a large class is a common phenomenon. The teachers, who participated in the survey, answered to the question 1.1 'What is the average number of students in your language class?' by mentioning that the number of the students varies from 30 to 65. So we can consider that the teachers need to deal with large classes. Code switching as an effective tool for maintaining discipline in a large class. In order to manage classroom discipline, to give instructions to the students about their sitting arrangements, to respond to students complaints, sometimes to draw students' attention, even sometimes to tell-off students for their misbehavior, the teacher may use the mother

tongue. At times the teacher greets the students by switching codes at the opening or closing of a class. So, in response to the question 1.4, 65% respondents agree with the fact. In response to question 1.3 and 1.4 'Do you switch codes more often in a large class than a small class? If yes, why?' 12 teachers (60%) responded positively by elaborating that in a small group it is easy to be interactive while in a large group the scope is least. With a small group a teacher can do a lot of things regarding English speaking and listening which is difficult to do with a large group. In addition, in a large class, the level of English among the students varies significantly. Besides, individual attention is not often possible in that sort of settings. Code switching in this context not only saves time but also helps students with low English proficiency to catch up with the ones with high proficiency level. 8 teachers did not agree with this statement

ii. **Students' background and mixed ability classes:** Answering to question 1.5 'In your class, how many students are from the m Pashto medium background?' 17 teachers (85%) responded that all the students, only 3 teachers (15%) responded that most of the students came from the Pashto medium background. Students coming from the Pashto medium background, in their SSC and HSC level, their English knowledge are confined in only a few contemporary text books which offer a little scope for real life English practice, specifically speaking practice. At the tertiary level when they are enrolled in different new courses, they are introduced with new terminologies, ideas and knowledge. Classes are conducted in English and the textbooks are written in English. But these students face a lot of difficulties to comprehend the class lectures; as a result, the teacher tends to switch codes to make the lesson easy.

iii. *Ease of communication:* To communicate more effectively with the students, the teacher often employs code switching...Q-1.6 'Code switching helps the students to understand the difficult and complicated topics easily. Do you agree?'

To explain new and difficult concepts, teachers often switch codes because this not only helps in

understanding but also saves time. While repeating or reinforcing any part of the lesson, defining or explaining a terminology, the teachers often take help of code switching.

iv. Explaining and translating unknown terms: In response to question 1.7 'do you think that code switching is a useful tool for clarification?' 12 teachers responded 'yes' (60%), 7 responded 'no' (35%). In question 1.8, teachers were asked 'Do you switch codes in order to explain unfamiliar terms, words or expressions?' 16 teachers said 'yes' (80%) and 4 said 'no' (20%). Whenever any new lesson, topic, concept or term is introduced before the students, the teacher needs to explain it in detail. Canagarajah (1995⁶) mentioned a number of strategies for explanation like repetition, reformulation, clarification, exemplification and so on. When a teacher adopts any of the strategies, he/she may consciously or subconsciously switch codes from English to Pashto. Code switching is also effective in clarifying any kind of confusion or misunderstanding regarding any topic. On the other hand, sometimes new words, terms or expressions need to be translated before students as a few students may not be familiar with the underlying meaning. Pashto is a very enriched and affluent language with an impressive body of vocabulary. It has, therefore, the ability to translate new and complicated terms with which the students have familiarity. So, translation works as a very useful device for gaining clear conception. At times if the teacher does not know or remember the exact English counterpart of a term or expression, he/she may switch codes.

v. Expression of *solidarity*: Code switching is a good way to express solidarity with the interlocutor. To build interpersonal relationships, to become friendly with students and to impact positively the effective level of the students, the teacher often switches codes consciously. This effective function of code switching is termed by Gumperz (1982⁷) as 'we code'. In kpk as most of the tertiary level students come from medium Pashto background, they feel inhibited in the classroom when a class is entirely taken in English, especially at the very beginning of the

undergraduate courses. So, if and when the teacher switches codes from English to Pashto by telling jokes, talking about personal experiences, sharing ideas with them, the students start to feel relaxed and in this way a friendly and supportive environment is created in favor of learning. As a response to question 1.9 majority of teachers responded positively (75%). Question 1.11 attempts to identify some more reasons for classroom code switching. In response to this question teachers shared their experiences, identified and explained a number of reasons that compels a teacher to switch from English to Pashto. Here some of the reasons are elaborated: Habitual usage: In KP Pashto is used widely in all spheres of national life, code switching is an everyday phenomenon. People from all phases of the society, regardless of the socioeconomic status or educational background, habitually switch codes between Pashto and English spontaneously and often subconsciously. But this is not bilingualism because most of them hardly have any command over English and they do intro word and intercontinental switching which sometimes turns into ungrammatical and incorrect juxtaposition of vocabulary from the two languages. There are a whole lot of words like table, chair, newspaper, fan, refrigerator, pencil, school, college, committee etc. whose Pashto counterpart is seldom used in everyday conversation. In the same way the teacher may do the same by moving from English to Pashto habitually and unknowingly.

Teachers' Attitude towards Classroom Code Switching

Generally it is said that code switching is a subconscious process which means that the speaker may shift from one language to another unknowingly and unpredictably. It is a matter of investigation whether the same thing happens in case of classroom discourse. In response to question 1.12, 70% teachers responded 'yes'. 'While taking a class do you switch codes consciously?' 'This response triggers to another enquiry why the teachers are so watchful about not to mix up codes whereas code switching is often a subconscious and spontaneous process. In questions 1.13 and 1.14, the teachers were

asked ‘Is there any clear direction from the university authority regarding classroom language use?’ ‘If yes, what is the rule?’ 18 teachers replied that yes there are certain rules regarding classroom language usage and the main rule is that English should be only language for classroom discourse. The university authority regularly monitors whether the teachers are speaking in English or not. Only 2 respondents said that there is no obligatory rule regarding classroom instruction... It is an observable fact that English is strictly maintained as the classroom medium of instruction in the private universities, though there is no written rule imposed by the University Grant Commission (UGC). Who starts the code switching? In answer to question 1.15, ‘Who initiate the code switching first?’ 13 teachers responded that the students start it (65%) and 7 responded that they themselves take the first step to use Pashto (35%). In response to question 1.16, ‘How do your students respond to you during the class?’ 11 teachers (55%) said that they switch codes, 7 said that the students use English (35%). Why students initiate and continue to respond by switching codes indicate the reasons for students code switching such as, the English proficiency level of the students coming from Pashto medium background and especially from the rural areas is very low; many of them are good at reading and writing but are very weak in speaking as they are not exposed to everyday conversational English. Moreover, the fear and shame of making mistakes in front of the teachers and classmates make them feel shaky and they take help of code switching. The contrasting picture on the rules of using English in classroom discourse and facts regarding classroom code switching pave the way for another inevitable question ‘Do you possess any negative attitude towards classroom code switching?’ ‘If yes, then why? 11 responded ‘yes’ (55%) and 9 responded ‘no’ (45%). Those who said that they view classroom code switching negatively justified their answer by saying that code switching interferes and hinders students’ language learning. Poplack, S. (1980)⁸ said that frequent code switching benefits no one because if the students are allowed to do it they would get used to it and they will grow the habit

of code switching whenever they speak. The target fluency and skill will never be achieved. On the contrary, the teacher’s fluency and proficiency may face hinders; so even if the teacher needs to switch codes it should be careful, controlled and target oriented. In response to question 1.19 and 1.20 ‘Do you encourage classroom code switching initiated both by the teacher and students? Why?’ 7 teachers replied ‘yes’ (35%) by showing logics like it helps students to learn properly, clarifies ideas perfectly in a short time, makes the topic easy and the learning atmosphere more friendly. On the other hand, 13 teachers (65%) responded that they do not encourage classroom code switching. Some of the arguments are given here: Because students’ habit of switching codes in class room may go beyond the line and hamper the intrinsic relation between the language and the subject. The more students engage in using English, the better. Encouraging students to code switch may not push them to try harder in speaking English. Similarly, if the teacher switches codes too frequently, s/he may not be able to inspire students by example. Muthusamy, P. (2009)⁹ Says that Code switching is likely to lead to greater dependency and reliance on L1 by both teachers and students. Some teachers might tend to abuse such liberty offered by a widespread acceptance of code switching as norm rather than exception. The students should go through the trouble to express their ideas in the target language which will make them work hard. Moreover, there is no scope for switching codes in the exam scripts. The survey results show that the teachers neither support nor oppose classroom code switching. They admit that classroom code switching is inevitable in the classes, though they are concerned about the restriction regarding mother tongue interference. Furthermore, the teachers acknowledge the usefulness and fruitful effect of code switching, yet they believe that with the help of controlled code switching students would gradually be able to gain proficiency in English.

Students’ Attitude towards Classroom Code Switching Initiated by the Teachers

The present study reveals that although many

teachers possess a negative attitude towards classroom code switching, they cannot deny the positive impact of code switching in the EFL classes. Now, the aim of the study is to find out what attitude the students possess towards classroom code switching, especially when it is initiated by teachers. The second set of survey questionnaire is designed to investigate it. 37 students from various departments participated in this survey. As most of the teachers consider that code switching serves as a very useful tool for language learning, so at the same time it is essential to know what the students think about it. Question 2.1 asked 'In your opinion, you could become more proficient in English if the teacher-

I. speaks entirely in English

II. Switches codes frequently'

Questions 2.2 and 2.3 tried to find out whether teachers' code switching reduces as students become senior and more proficient in the target language or remains the same. 32 students responded positively (86%) that for the junior level student's teachers usually take help of code switching and as they become seniors and as their proficiency level advances the teacher reduce the rate of code switching. Only 5 students (14%) said that the rate of teachers' code switching does not change over the time. Code switching, therefore, is used as a mode of 'scaffolding' to facilitate learning. As the student develops knowledge and gains confidence, the teacher removes the scaffold carefully. Thus, with time, code switching turns from a regular to a frequent to an occasional phenomenon. Question 2.4 enquires 'Teachers' code switching facilitates learning. Do you agree?' In response to this question 22 students strongly agreed (59%) and 15 students mildly agreed (41%) to the statement. No one disagreed with the statement. Unanimously all the participants agreed that they are benefited by code switching. In response to question 2.5 'Does your teacher encourage classroom code switching?' 6 students responded 'yes' (16%) and 31 students said 'no' (84%). This reveals another aspect of classroom code switching that teachers occasionally and consciously switch codes, but they never welcome the idea that

students should switch codes. Sert, O (2005) said that in classroom discourse if a student switches code subconsciously, the teacher's points that out and remind him/her to use English. Question 2.6 inquired 'Teachers' frequent code switching can create negative impact in your understanding of English. Do you agree?' to find out students' perception towards teachers' code switching and its effectiveness. As majority of students (71%) agreed to the idea, so it can be assumed that frequent code switching is perceived negatively and it can hamper and impact language learning. Question 2.7 tried to find out the students' view regarding teachers code switching and rules of classroom discourse. 'When a teacher switches codes, he/she violates rules of classroom language usage. Do you agree? This question receives a mixed reaction from students. Some students consider that teachers' code switching is a violation of the university rule, but some admit that it facilitates understanding, so they do not consider it as an offence. If a comparative study is made between the responses of teachers and students regarding their attitude towards classroom code switching, we will find that although teachers consider that code switching plays an effective role in successful EFL learning, they do not want to accept code switching as a positive phenomenon. But students are, however, more open and positive towards code switching because they think this is an easier and helpful way to gain access to a foreign language like English.

Conclusion

This study attempted to make an in depth analysis in teachers' code switching practice in classroom discourse from different angles and viewpoints. The reasons for teachers' code switching may vary according to the lesson topic, teaching experience and the students' level and background. Wardhaugh, R. (1992)¹⁰ said that Code switching has the power to facilitate greater understanding and to involve and cohere the entire classroom population in the lesson. The teachers, however, need to remember that English is the medium of instruction and code switching should be kept to an effective minimum. As code switching

facilitates learning, so some teachers and students might tend to abuse the practice of classroom code switching offered by a widespread acceptance of code switching as a norm rather than an exception. As students' poor level of understanding in English triggers the initiation of code switching, students' proficiency need to be increased at their preliminary level, i.e. at the school and college level. Winford, D. (2003)¹¹ that Good knowledge and sound basis of English if achieved on the part of the students at the primary and secondary level will ultimately make the teachers' code switching target oriented and occasional at the tertiary level.

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