

Code-Switching as a Teaching Strategy: A Case Study of COMSATS Institute of Information Technology Pakistan

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ABSTRACT

English enjoys a prestigious status as an official language in Pakistan. However, despite being a compulsory subject in schools and colleges in the Pakistani education system, English poses serious challenges to the students. Due to the problematic examination system and outdated course books, students often do not perform effectively in the English language. As a result, even at university level, students lack proper proficiency particularly in speaking and listening skills. Keeping the predicament of students in mind, sometimes teachers opt to use L1 to facilitate the language learning process. The present study has been conducted at COMSATS Institute of Information Technology Pakistan to investigate whether code switching is approved as a teaching methodology by teachers and students. Data have been collected through two different questionnaires from students and English teachers of three campuses of CIIT. The results show that the majority of teachers and students prefer code-switching as a teaching strategy. However, they are of the opinion that use of L1 should be purposeful, limited and judicious. The present study also answers the ongoing debate about the use of code-switching as a teaching strategy by proving that teachers and students approve of it as an effective component of the teaching methodology. This research would guide English language teachers to modify their teaching methodologies in order to improve the learning process in English language classes.

KEYWORDS: EFL, Code-switching, teaching strategy, student's preference

Introduction

The world has gained the status of a global village where multilingualism is a very common phenomenon. Languages are flexible enough to digest and absorb the vocabulary of diverse languages to be acceptable across the world. Linguistically, none of the languages are good or bad; however, its importance is established through the people who speak it. If it is the language of a powerful country, it is used and accepted by the people more willingly as compared to many other languages. So is the case with the English language. We live in a time where the English language has crossed national boundaries due to its importance. It is being used as a global lingua franca in many countries and is among the top five most spoken languages across the world (Kachru, 1993). In these circumstances, “the ideological, cultural and elitist power of English” is evident (Kachru, 1997, p. 227).

The English language is highly important and widespread in Pakistan due to many reasons. Pakistan has been a part of the area which was the colony of the British Empire. The British ruled the subcontinent over a century and left ineradicable signs on this area, including the linguistic landscape. In fact, colonization is an important factor which is responsible for the development of bilingualism (Kachru, 1986). Since then, even after partition and independence, Pakistan could not deny or minimize the importance of the English language. Pakistan is a multilingual country where English is an official language and is considered a source of prestigious and accomplished life and a key to many doors (Sichyova, 2005). Urdu carries the status of a national language along with a variety of regional languages which are spoken across the country. As a matter of fact, Pakistani society uses at least three languages at the same time and people are supposed to learn and use them to survive in the society.

Bilingualism is the term used for the ability to speak two or more languages at a time. Hamers and Blanc (2000) define the term “bilingually” to demonstrate the usage of two languages by an individual and consider “bilingualism” for the field of study which observes the functioning of two or more languages in a society. Bilingual education is a type of education where students are taught through more than one language. To be precise, any educational system where more than one language is utilized is bilingual. Bilingualism in education deals with academic issues when children speaking one language may enter into the education system which operates in another language (Lotherington, 2000).

In Pakistan, English is taught as a compulsory subject in schools, colleges and universities. However, despite this endeavour, it is observed that English poses a serious challenge to students in their learning process. The problematic situation arises when students are observed as being weak and reluctant in speaking and writing English fluently even at university level. English is taught at school and college levels but due to a faulty examination system, incompetent English teachers and faulty course books, students focus on two skills i.e. writing and reading (Ahmed, 2004; Kiran, 2010). Speaking and listening skills are bitterly ignored areas in the Pakistani education system as these skills are not tested by the examination system. English is taught as a subject and not as a language (Kiran, 2010) which results in poor performance of students even after 13-15 years of English language learning. As a result, teachers code-switch while teaching English in the class room. In a multilingual country like Pakistan, the linguistic phenomenon of combining more than two languages is very common even in classrooms (Gulzar, 2010). In the past, people misunderstood the concept of alternation between two languages and considered it a drawback or deficiency to code-switch in the English language classrooms (Gulzar & Qadir, 2010). However, recently, researchers have established this phenomenon as systematic, skilled and socially meaningful (Woolard, 2004) as it gets rid of a cognitive load of the learners which

helps in processing the understanding. The “English Only” classroom might result in frustration if the material is not comprehensible to the learners (Brice & Roseberry-McKibbin, 2001; Widdowson, 2003).

In Pakistan, there is a dearth of research on the classroom discourse of English language classes (Gulzar, 2010) which provides strong justification to the researcher to investigate the use of code-switching as a teaching strategy.

Significance of the research

The research is significant as it would

1. Guide the teachers and students about the role of code-switching as a teaching strategy in English language classrooms.
2. Answer the ongoing debate whether any other language besides English should be used in EFL classrooms.
3. Help teachers to modify their teaching methodology to improve the language learning process.

Research questions

The following research questions have been considered for the present study.

1. How do English teachers and students take the issue of code-switching in EFL classrooms?
2. What should be the frequency of code-switching in EFL classrooms?
3. Which function is performed by code-switching in English language classrooms?

Literature review

Various studies have been conducted since the 1990s related to the issue of usage of the native language in English language classrooms. In the past, some of the researchers emphasized usage of the target language only in language classes (Chambers, 1991; Halliwell & Jones, 1991). Sert (2005) asserts that there are two extremes regarding usage of code-switching in language classrooms. On one side, teachers are of the view that strict rules of second language learning should be followed and students as well as teachers should be compelled to use only the target language by practicing the communicative techniques in their true essence. This assertion is favoured by Taha (2008) who establishes through his investigation of students and teachers of an Arabic university that “alternation between English and Arabic in the classroom” should be discouraged and all members of the classroom should be obligated to use the medium of instruction designated for the study (p. 337).

However, language instructors who support bilingual instruction in the form of code-switching consider it a useful strategy for students in many aspects, especially in the teaching of beginner students (Sert, 2005). Skiba (1997) opines that instead of considering code-switching as an intrusion in the foreign language, the broader view for instructors and students is to see code-switching as “a bridge between two languages that the students are learning (Faltis, 1989, as cited by Brice & Roseberry-McKibbin, 2001, p. 3) as it is an unavoidable tool for language teaching and an “interactional strategy” (Van Dulm, 2007, p. 15) for social interactions. We can conclude that code-switching as a teaching strategy has been favoured as well as opposed by the researchers through strong arguments and both are right in their own way. However, the teachers should realize that the demands of every subject and class are different and they should be flexible enough to modify their teaching methodology according to the requirement of the class.

Pakistani context

Code-switching as a teaching strategy has been investigated recently in Pakistan and various researchers have viewed it as a useful technique in language classes. According to Gulzar (2010), code-switching is a useful phenomenon in a country like Pakistan where students are inclined to learn more than one language. Through the opinion of English language teachers, he asserts that the trend of code-switching in Pakistani EFL classrooms is used to serve the following functions: clarification, giving instruction, translation of ideas, elaboration of difficult concepts, socialization factor for expressing feelings and emotions, and overcoming linguistic deficiency. Tariq, Bilal, Abbas and Mahmood (2013) and Sultana and Gulzar (2010) also support the same assertions regarding the functions and significance of code-switching in English language classrooms in Pakistani context.

Iqbal (2010) also shares the same opinion that for university teachers “code-switching is a natural, creative and innovative way of communication of the bilingual university teachers in Pakistan, which is used as a technique for facilitating students” (p. 1). However, he also opines that there must be constraints and limitations of code-switching in the classroom and it should be done only after identifying the needs and problems of the students. In fact, bilingualism as “a resource in teaching facilitates in learning L2 and helps make more people acknowledge the contribution of bilingualism in EFL classes”; however, he is also of the view that the use of code-switching should be “moderate” and “judicious” (Sipra, 2013, p. 1).

Awan and Sheeraz (2011) also recommend that teachers should use code-switching without being afraid of peer reproach as it makes the communication process in classes more effective and interactive; particularly, in the Pakistani background where English is mostly the third language for students. However, they also favour careful and purposeful use of code-switching as a teaching strategy to enhance the learning process. In fact, “an alteration in language use appears to be academic need in today’s changing world though it may be cognitive or social need in the classroom” (Nadeem, 2012, p. 155).

Gulzar and Qadir (2010) agree with the previous researchers in that “purpose-oriented” code-switching is acceptable by the experts in most of the cases. They maintain that a clear policy regarding issues of language choices in the education sector should be formulated. They claim that “no co-ordination was found about the medium(s) of instruction amongst policy makers and English language teachers” (p. 422).

Alam and Bashhirudin (2013) are of the view that along with many other strategies, code-switching is inevitable for improving speaking skills in the language learning process. It should be considered a useful way for improving efficiency in second language learners. Jabeen (2010) also corroborates with the same idea and strongly recommends the need to change the mindsets of people about the use of the native language in the teaching of English. The research by Abbas, Aslam and Rana (2011) also favours the previous assertions and adds that code-mixing is not interference; rather, it serves for continuity and fluency. Thus, it has become a very useful communicative strategy and the students use it spontaneously as they are aware of the communicative advantages they gain by using it.

All the above discussion indicates that code-switching has been approved as a teaching strategy by the majority of the teachers and students in Pakistan. However, there is a mutual agreement that the use of code-switching should not be overdone. Rather, it should be used selectively and according to the needs of the subject and students.

Methodology

A total number of 100 students of the Bachelor of Software Engineering, Computer Sciences, Telecom Engineering and 30 English language faculty members of COMSATS Institute of Information Technology have been chosen as the sample for the present study. English language is taught in the first three semesters to these students as a compulsory subject. The English language faculty has been included in this sample from three campuses of COMSATS i.e. Wah Cantt, Abbottabad and Lahore. The instrument of data collection is a questionnaire which consists of a combination of open-ended and closed-ended questions. Two separate questionnaires have been developed for students and teachers. The teachers' questionnaire helped in finding teachers' stance regarding code-switching while the students' questionnaire was aimed at eliciting their perspectives. Both the questionnaires also helped in finding similarities in teacher and student opinions regarding the issue of code-switching in classrooms. The questionnaires were adapted from the research conducted by Muhammad Aslam Sipra (2013). There was generally a confusion among students of what code-switching is. Therefore, the researcher managed to guide the students before giving them the questionnaire. The researcher has delimited the scope by concentrating on the use of code-switching as a teaching aid and by studying a sample from COMSATS University only.

Results

The data are presented in two sections. The first section presents the data obtained from the teachers and the second section presents the data obtained from the students.

Results obtained from the teachers

Table 1

Teaching Experience of Faculty

No.	Teaching Experience	% of Respondents
1	0-2 years	0%
2	3-5 years	28%
3	6- 15 years	42%
4	16- 25 years or above	28%

Table 1 indicates that among the four different categories of teaching experience, 42% of teachers have 6-15 years, while 28% have 3-5 and 16-25 years or above of teaching experience. It shows that most of the respondents are in the middle of their career and quite experienced in teaching English language. We can expect that their contribution can provide worthwhile information regarding the use of code-switching in EFL classrooms.

Table 2

Views on whether code-switching is useful as a teaching strategy in EFL classrooms

No.	Response	% of Respondents
1.	Yes	100%
2.	No	0
3.	Not sure	0

Table 2 shows that all the teachers are in favour of code-switching as a teaching strategy which shows the acceptance, effectiveness and popularity of code-switching among university teachers. The results are not unexpected as the teachers are teaching students who have an engineering background and need extra assistance in the form of code-switching to make their learning process more successful. However, the question could have been answered in a somewhat

different way if asked to the teachers teaching students from the language and literature background.

Table 3
Views on the purposes of code-switching in the classroom

No.	Purposes	% of Responses
1.	to define some new vocabulary concepts	28%
2.	to practice the use of some phrases and expressions (e.g. doing translation exercises)	71%
3.	to express complex grammar issues	28%
4.	to convey complicated concepts or ideas	85%
5.	to give instructions	42%
6.	to give suggestions on how to learn more effectively	42%
7.	If any other, please specify	0

Table 3 makes it clear that code-switching is favoured by teachers for different purposes. According to the data, 28% of teachers use it to define some new vocabulary items while 71% use it to practice the use of phrases and expressions. The next category is to explain complex grammar points which is supported by 28% of teachers. A big group of teachers (85%) use it to explain difficult concepts or ideas. The next two categories are to give instructions and suggestions on how to learn more effectively which are supported by 42% of teachers respectively. The results indicate that code-switching is being used as an aid at different levels of the teaching process and it has not been looked down upon. It appears to be a tool for teachers in difficult times when they are handicapped due to time constraints or other reasons.

Table 4
Views on why code-switching is necessary in the classroom

No.	Categories	% of Responses
1.	It helps understanding greatly	100
2.	It is more effective	71
3.	It is less time-consuming	42
4.	Other, please specify	42

The teachers were given the opportunity to select more than one reason for the practice of code-switching in the classroom. Table 4 shows that 100% of the teachers are in favour of code-switching as it aids the comprehension process; while 71% are of the view that it is more effective and 42% think that it is less time consuming. The concepts which may take more time can be explained in a short time due to code-switching. So, code-switching appears as a time saving strategy for the teachers who have, of course, a short time for teaching.

Table 5
Views on whether students in EFL classrooms are engaged for a longer time in bilingual classrooms due to use of L1

No.	Response	% of Responses
1.	Strongly Agree	14
2.	Agree	42
3.	Not Sure	42
4.	Disagree	0
5.	Strongly Disagree	0

Table 5 shows that 14% strongly agree while 42% agree and 42% are not sure. No one has selected the option of “disagree” and “strongly disagree.” The results indicate that code-switching can help in retaining the attention and interest of students for a longer time as compared to the classes where only the target language is used. It is observed that teachers often

crack some jokes in the native language to avoid boredom and tiredness. Sometimes, it becomes a source of releasing students' tension and frustration which they may feel if only L2 is used.

Table 6

Views on whether L1 should be used constantly to achieve fluency in L2

No.	Response	% of Responses
1.	Yes	57
2.	No	28
3.	Not sure	42

The results indicate that 57% of teachers are in favour while 28% are against the constant use of L1. 42% are not sure about this. It is evident that most of the teachers think that constant use of L1 can help the students in gaining better fluency in L2. However as mentioned in the literature reviewed, the use of L1 should be highly judicious and selective.

Results of the questionnaire for students

The data have been taken from the students through a questionnaire which carries six close-ended and open-ended questions. The students are between 20-25 years old and their years of learning are more than ten years. They have been selected as the sample for this study as they have interaction with English for a long time and they are in a better position to give a solid judgment about code-switching as a teaching strategy.

Table 7

People with whom respondents speak English

No.	Variables	% of Responses
1.	With family	1
2.	With friends/classmates	29
3.	With neighbours	1
4.	With teachers	75

In this question, students could select more than one variable. Table 7 shows that only 1% of students speak English with their family while 29% speak English with friends or classmates. Speaking English with neighbours is only 1% while speaking English with teachers comes from 75% of the students. The results show clearly that English is mostly reserved for language classes which can be another reason why students are not very fluent in this language as the interaction of students with teachers is very brief and in classes where the enrolment is around 50, each student might not take the opportunity to speak in every class. In these circumstances, students are in dire need of code-switching to enhance learning. Another major group with whom students try to speak English comes from friends and classmates.

Table 8

Views on how essential it is to know English

No.	Categories	% of Responses
1.	Very important	67
2.	Important	36
3.	Not important	0
4.	Not at all Important	1

This table conveys that 67% of students consider English as very important while 36% think that it is important. No one considers it as "not important" while only 1% think that it is not important at all for them. The results show that students are well aware of the importance of English language in the present times. They do understand the reasons behind learning this language.

Table 9

Views on usefulness of code-switching as a teaching strategy in the classroom

No.	Response	% of Responses
1.	Yes	91%
2.	No	5%
3.	Not sure	9%

This table indicates that 91% of students agree that code-switching is a useful strategy in EFL classrooms while 5% do not agree with this idea. 9% are not sure about it. The results show that code-switching as a teaching aid is not only acceptable among teachers but also among students. They think code-switching can help make the classrooms more conducive for English language learning. Keeping in mind the engineering background of the students, their acceptance of code-switching in language classrooms is natural and justified.

Table 10

Views on the purposes of code-switching in the classroom

No.	Purposes	% of Responses
1.	to help define some new vocabulary items	58%
2.	to practice the use of some phrases and expressions	29%
3.	to explain complex grammar points	47%
4.	to explain difficult concepts or ideas	62%
5.	to give instructions	21%
6.	to give suggestions on how to learn more effectively	33%
7.	If any other, please specify.	0%

For this question, students could select more than one variable. This table indicates that 58% of students prefer code-switching in the classroom to help in defining some new vocabulary items while 29% think it is useful in practicing the use of some phrases and expressions. The next category “to explain complex grammar points” has been favoured by 47% while “to explain difficult concepts or ideas” has been favoured by 62%. The next variable “to give instructions” has been chosen by 21% of students while “to give suggestions on how to learn more effectively” has been chosen by 33% of students. The first and fourth purposes have been favoured by both teachers and students who view that code-switching can offer a helping hand in the teaching and learning of English. It has generally been observed that explaining a new word or a complicated concept is more time consuming and difficult; that is why, a big majority are in favour of using code-switching. The table also shows that students are aware of the usefulness of this strategy and they do not consider it a taboo or a drawback on the teacher’s part.

Table 11

Percentage of time that should be given to L1 in the class

No.	Time given to L1	% of Responses
1.	10-20%	5 %
2.	21-40%	73%
3.	41-60%	18%
4.	61% and above	1%

The results show that 5% of students think that code-switching should take up 10-20% of class time while 73% students are of the view that its use should be 21-40%. This table is very important as it shows the choice of students regarding the frequency of code-switching in the classroom. It shows that students are well aware of constraints and limitations of code-switching as they opine that it should be selective and may be a last resort of the teacher rather than making it a complete norm of the class.

Discussion

It is observed that although students understand the importance of the English language in practical life and have been learning this language for more than 10 years, yet, they are exposed to the English language mostly either in interaction with their teachers or in English classrooms. The point to be noted is that these are unavoidable situations of speaking English, indicating that they do not take any special effort to master this language. The study also shows that despite understanding the importance of English language in the present scenario, their attitude is quite casual towards the language. The researcher also had informal discussions with the participants and got to know that some of the students did not even like to have their course books in the English language. They argued in this regard that Urdu, being the national language, should be given priority and their books should be translated in the national language. They were of the view that their academic performance can increase through this change as the English language has caused them difficulty. The researcher also observed a biased attitude of a few students towards English as they wanted to promote Urdu language as a sign of patriotism and sovereignty. They argued that getting rid of English would mean leaving the slave attitude which imperialism has left behind.

Many students have also been found to be comfortable with English. They agreed that code-switching is a useful teaching aid and should be used in classes to express complex concepts, explaining difficult vocabulary and grammatical concepts, practicing the use of some phrases and expressions, giving suggestions and instructions (Brice, 2000). The strategy has been considered more effective for better comprehension in a short time. It has been agreed that code-switching should be used wisely and purposefully to make it more fruitful. Regarding the issue of the use of code-switching in EFL classrooms, it has been observed that almost all the teachers are in favour of code-switching while the situation is not the same with students. Some of the students even prefer that code-switching not be used in classes at all; however, their percentage is very small. The teachers' opinion can be justified as they are mostly handling overcrowded classes and code-switching is a helpful resource in managing such classes. However, the students who do not favour code-switching assert that this strategy can divert their attention and they might not be able to achieve complete competence in English due to code-switching.

The study proves that code-switching should be considered as an extra resource that could be used by the teachers in difficult situations (Gulzar & Qadir, 2010); however, excessive use should be avoided to achieve the maximum positive output. The present study has been conducted in a background where English is being taught as a supplementary course to Engineering students. Code-switching in these classes where English is not a major subject is more acceptable and recommended as compared to typical language and literature classes.

This study corroborates with previous studies (Gulzar, 2010; Nadeem, 2012; Sipra, 2013; Tariq et al., 2013; Gulnaz & Qadir, 2010) that code-switching should be considered a teaching aid and not an obstacle in the language learning process. Teachers need to change their attitude in this regard and they must understand the potential use of code-switching, particularly, in classes where English is being taught as a subsidiary course. They do need to understand that code-switching will help make the classroom learning environment more conducive and interactive. If students are stuck somewhere, they should also not be ashamed to code-switch to convey their ideas and points of view.

Conclusion

The findings of the research prove that teachers' attitude towards code-switching as a teaching strategy is highly positive and it is practiced in classes by the teachers. This strategy has also been accepted by a big majority of students. It shows their awareness of the role of code-switching in the teaching and learning process. It has been observed that both students and teachers do not consider it an impediment in English language learning; rather, they consider it a tool which facilitates the learning process. The need of the hour is that this requirement of students and teachers should be documented in a proper educational policy so that teachers might have a clear guideline about the use of code-switching. However, the researcher would like to assert again that excessive use of code-switching must be avoided as it can lead to a classroom environment where English language learning can be affected negatively. It is up to the teachers to decide which situations really demand code-switching. The study also establishes that code-switching makes the learning process easier and interesting as the students' attention and interest can be retained in the classroom for a longer time. The study proves that code-switching should not be looked down upon in English language classes; rather, it should be considered an aid in language learning. Use of L1 can help in releasing tension and boredom as it creates the interest of students in classes which can, otherwise, be difficult if the "only-English" attitude is adopted.

Recommendation for future research

The present research was limited to just three campuses of one university. As such the result could not be generalized beyond this sample. Future researchers can enlarge the sample by including more universities from different cities in Pakistan. The research findings can also be more conclusive, comprehensive and reliable if interviews of teachers and students are included.

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