



The Role of L1 in Low-proficiency EFL Classrooms Does Code-switching Enhance Learning?

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Abstract. The use of the native language in second language classrooms has been controversial, the fact is that interspersal of native and second language use is common. The reasons for this phenomenon are related to factors such as the role of the first language, whether the teacher is a non-native speaker, the level of students' second language proficiency, and the critical period hypothesis of language acquisition. Although previous studies explored the need for code-switching, few studies have been based on EFL contexts in which the teacher is a non-native speaker and the students are low language proficiency. This study examines the function of code-switching in classroom management, input, and communicative competence. By reviewing the related research and combining the specific EFL context, it can be concluded that code-switching not only enhances the effect of the overall EFL classroom with the non-native teachers and low-proficiency students but also promotes the SLA.

Keywords: code-switching, EFL classroom, non-native language teacher, low-proficiency L2 students

1 Introduction

How the role of the L1 is perceived is a fundamental question that no second language teaching practice can avoid. Ideally, it is better to only use the target language for instruction and communication in the second language classroom. The second language classroom should provide maximum exposure to the target language¹. The idea that too much use of the first language takes away and deprives students of the opportunity to hear and process the target language is also reflected in several pedagogical ideas. However, as research progresses, the idea that only the target language dominates the classroom is being challenged and the use of the first language in second language classrooms is returning to the field of language education. More attention has been paid to the use of the L1 as a potential resource for language acquisition rather than as a hindrance². In recent years, classroom-based research has shown that language shift is not uncommon in language classrooms and many researchers support and agree with the careful and principled use of first languages.

Code-switching is converting from one language to the use of another in the process of communication. Although research on the effectiveness of L1 use in second language

classrooms has progressed, there is also research that addresses the beliefs of teachers about the use of code-switching and its role.

Therefore, this paper argues that the appropriate use of code-switching in the EFL class can enhance the learning of L2, in which the context is students with low proficiency and teachers are all non-native speakers. This paper first discusses how the use of code-switching in EFL classrooms ensures the management of the classroom. Then, the paper explores the function of code-switching in the classroom in the improvement of comprehensible input, and how L1 facilitates the interaction of the L2 class. Finally, this article illustrates how language switching can facilitate language learning in such a teaching environment, considering the discussions previously conducted and the actual EFL teaching environment. It also provides some implications for EFL teachers in similar contexts.

2 Code-switching as scaffolding for classroom management

Second language teachers and students are the main participants in second language education practice. Their motivations for language use and the way they use language can influence the progress of a second language classroom, including the organization, management, and pace of the class.

Bonyadi et al.³, as part of the scholars supporting code-switching, argued that multilingual speakers using code-switching in interaction can help maintain educational sustainability. Their study explores the types of code-switching used in the classroom and teachers' motivations from the teachers' perspective. They defined coding and code-switching as converges with Wardhaugh's^[4] in that individual language behavior can be influenced in the face of diverse socio-cultural contexts. When a person's linguistic behavior is affected, the speech in this context may take a different form, called a code. Code-switching, on the other hand, is the substitution of one code for another to meet communication needs. This also represents the social function of language^[5].

Through their qualitative analysis of the results, Bonyadi et al.⁶ found that "intra-sentential and inter-sentential types of code-switching were practiced throughout the classroom teaching processes. The main motives for resorting to code-switching were found to be EFL students' lack of linguistic proficiency, keeping solidarity with the students and managing the classrooms" (p 45). Besides, in the study by Bonyadi et al. on second language teaching in Iran, code-switching was also found to be more likely to occur when teachers deliver grammar and vocabulary lessons. It is also concentrated in the second thirty minutes of the class and the period before the end of the class. This phenomenon is also extremely common in the Chinese teaching environment. Usually, when you first enter a language class, the teacher does not explain the language items. Since at this time the students are not yet fully engaged in language learning. Therefore, it is common for teachers to use a video or audio in L2 related to the topic to introduce the theme of this class. And then, when explaining knowledge of L2, the teacher prefers to explain grammar rules in L1 and use L2 for giving examples. As class time is usually limited, teachers need to organize each section reasonably. If the L2 is used to explain

language points such as grammar, it will inevitably take longer. Furthermore, for second language learning, grasping language points such as grammar is only the foundation of learning, students need to know more about how to apply them. Therefore, for classroom time and content management, teachers are more likely to use code-switching to move the class forward efficiently.

Secondly, teachers also tend to use code-switching when discussing classroom management rules. Obviously, if students want to deal with the task successfully, they must comprehend what they have to do. For the sake of efficiency, only using L2 falls short of this purpose. As Bonyadi et al. found from their interviews with teachers that they did a lot of code-switching when checking content, managing task progress, giving instructions for completing tasks, and elaborating on matters related to classroom management. This was done not only to make learners feel relaxed in the language classroom but also to connect with students. In low language proficiency EFL classrooms, the first language embedded teaching strategies in the second language classroom have always governed language teaching activities like norms^[7]. Thus, code-switching has a two-way demand for teachers and students. The teacher code-switching from English to Chinese to process the subject matter, clarify meaning by providing Chinese equivalents, elicit Chinese translations, check learners' understanding and provide meta-linguistic information. Students use code-switching to complete classroom tasks and get the target information they need. Code-switching in this context better helps the teacher and students involved in the classroom to work together to manage and develop the classroom.

Thirdly, the reason for teachers' code-switching found by Bonyadi et al. was to maintain a unifying relationship with their students. In practice, code-switching is still used to help students who lack language skills to enter the classroom. Also, code-switching is used more frequently with less proficient students. In second language teaching environments such as China and Iran, where there is a large number of low proficiency students, many students do not actively respond to the teacher's questions or participate in interactive activities in the English classroom. The reason for this is that they are both at a low level of proficiency and lack language confidence. However, failure to use code-switching may undermine the effectiveness of English language teaching and lead to a breakdown in classroom interaction. To motivate students and enable them to enter the classroom as well, teachers need to adopt code-switching.

When teachers switch L2 to L1, they can get closer to the students and build students' confidence in language learning so that they can enter the classroom better. The mother tongue makes students feel closer and warmer, whereas the second language somewhat indexes a more distant and formal teacher-student relationship^[13]. Therefore, for students with low language proficiency who need affirmation, teachers may switch to the first language when appropriate to build rapport with individual students, establish a more intimate personal relationship and promote greater student participation.

3 Code-switching as assist for comprehensible input

According to Krashen's input hypothesis, if students cannot understand language input, then they cannot acquire the language. Therefore, students expect more input, especially comprehensible input, in the L2 classroom to facilitate language learning. Enama⁸ examined whether English learners with a low level of English in Cameroon perform better when their L1 (French) is also used for teaching English. For this research, a technical school offered two grammar classes and two speaking classes to 22 English language students. The students were divided into two groups. The control group (CG) consisted of the 11 students who scored the highest on the last three grammar and speaking tests before the study began. Through a controlled trial, the study found that code-switching did not hinder learning. When students with low language proficiency were allowed to use code-switching while learning grammar and speaking scored higher on these two skills than the control group who were not allowed to use it. During the code-switching class, students can receive immediate knowledge under the instruction by L1, and they can get more improvement during the second language instruction phase.

As concluded by Enama in his research, "switching codes constantly from English to French sharpened learners' cognitive abilities and metalinguistic awareness and lowered their anxiety, making them more disposed to comprehend linguistic input and respond to test instructions better. By judiciously using French, the teacher was able to scaffold linguistic input within learners' ZPD, resulting in better comprehension and improved performance on tests" (p 26). As well as helping with comprehensible input, the use of the first language in code-switching can help to extract language from memory and explore and extend classroom content, working together to deepen understanding of input through task-guided classroom action.

In the second language classroom, after the lecture stage, teachers assign various types of written and oral tasks to help students internalize their knowledge. However, the knowledge is always presented in the form of concepts during the lecture stage, students are only completing the process of writing down what is on the board in their notebooks and they do not know how to apply it. Therefore, when the lesson progresses to the activity stage, students with low language proficiency often face the dilemma of not being able to complete questions or express thoughts. In addition, for these kinds of students, their knowledge of the points is still at the general awareness stage and is not internalized and absorbed into their understanding. If the teacher insists on using a second language without code-switching, these classroom tasks cannot be completed in the limited time available in the classroom. In addition, comprehensible input is not guaranteed when the teacher is speaking in a second language. Teachers need to spend a lot of time for students to be able to understand parts of what they know. For example, they need to use a priori knowledge to evoke the students' memory and give a lot of examples for comparison, or in the grammatical explanation classroom. If the teacher wants to show the students what the past tense is in the second language, without using code-switching, the teacher needs to do a lot of examples of comparisons with the simple present tense. Obviously, this is time-consuming and does not ensure that students who have a weak foundation of prior knowledge understand what the teacher is saying.

In addition, the teacher needs to avoid using words and phrases that are unfamiliar to the students in the process. This behavior also invariably increases the teacher's workload. However, if code-switching is used during this phase, students can immediately understand how this language knowledge is used. With this initial understanding, complete comprehension and internalization of the input are achieved during the task completion process. At the same time, it is the a priori knowledge that the teacher recalls using the first language in this process that also serves the purpose of reinforcing memory for the students.

4 Code-switching as promotion of communicative competence development

For students with low language proficiency, code-switching can develop second language students' communicative competence by providing effective strategies that meet learners' intentions in classroom interactions. Cook ^[9] argues that code-switching is an effective second language learning and teaching strategy. "Treating the L1 as a classroom resource opens up ways of employing the L1, for the teacher to convey meaning and explain grammar and to organize the class, and for the students to use as part of their collaborative learning and of their individual strategy use" (p 46).

From the teacher's perspective, code-switching can be used as a communicative strategy to fill in the cognitive gaps of students and to help the teacher fully convey the content that has been said to the students. Since it not only saves a lot of time in certain contexts but also makes it possible to explain grammatical points more clearly, conduct effective classroom activities, and organize instructions. From the students' perspective, code-switching is a normal phenomenon in second language classrooms where the teacher is a non-native speaker and the students are low language proficient. Because of the trust in the first language, there exists the switch to the L1 when lacks expressive skills. Furthermore, as discussed earlier, the first language can be used as a scaffold to help students negotiate meaning. When conversations can be kept coherent, learners will instead feel confident in using the second language. Due to they know that they can use code-switching to maintain interaction even though their second language is relatively less expressive ^[10]. When learners with low language proficiency interact in the classroom, they may explain tasks to each other, negotiate the roles they will play, or compare their understanding or output of language through L1. However, due to limited second language proficiency, students usually find that the language resources used do not meet the needs of actual communication. Students are likely to interrupt communication in the second language and turn to the first language to compensate for the lack of proficiency in the second language. Moreover, in the actual language classroom, if given the freedom to choose languages, students can make correct and appropriate comments in their mother tongue that they would not be able to express in their second language.

In general, code-switching can help develop communicative competence in the second language classroom, especially for students with low language proficiency. Since code-switching is a supportive factor in the exchange of information and interaction

during communicative tasks and is present as a tool for conveying meaning^[11]. For example, in Chinese second language classrooms, students use code-switching in the communication phase to overcome difficult aspects of interaction. This is like discussing a problem in a group and reaching a conclusion. Due to their weak language skills, many words and phrases cannot be expressed accurately in the second language, so students use the first language to communicate. But because they are working on a language task in a second language classroom, they need to share their conclusions in the second language in class. So, to have a more accurate answer when sharing, students will get the complete conclusion in the second language one after another in the middle and later stages of the interactive task. But in the process, the students' communicative skills are also being developed. Since the use of code-switching in the interaction helps students to conduct better meaning negotiation and communicate more interpersonally.

5 Conclusion

In this study, we review the literature on first language use and code-switching. As a result, this paper is more comprehensive and in-depth than previous research. Overall, this paper explores how code-switching facilitates second language learning at the level of practice with non-native teachers and students with low language proficiency. It is widely accepted that intelligent and principled language using can contribute to success in foreign language learning. In the context of code-switching, this study both examines the concept of code-switching in the context of English language learning and teaching, and further provides examples of the use of teacher-initiated code-switching and student-initiated code-switching and their impact on English language learning. What is clear is that the use of code-switching in the classroom is indispensable for non-native teachers and low language proficiency students. Its facilitative effects include the following two aspects. Firstly, the first and second languages play a complementary role in the low proficiency classroom, and their interplay interaction ensures that the second language classroom functions better. Secondly, teachers tend to focus on the procedural and interpersonal functions of first language use and code-switching, while students tend to focus on the facilitative role of mother tongue use and code-switching in second language learning, both at the comprehension and communicative levels.

To be effective in native language transfer, teachers should guide students to find an appropriate place for the use of the first language to help learners maximize their second language learning without neglecting the target language. Teachers should also reinforce their understanding of the importance of second language learning and how a second language can contribute to language learning in the classroom. In conclusion, the effective use of code-switching is extremely important for students with low language proficiency, not only to aid better task clarification and facilitate classroom management but also to motivate students and provide comprehensible input. However, the frequency of the switch should be determined by continuous evaluation of students' L2 performance and the content of the courses.

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