The 8th International Language for Specific Purposes (LSP) Seminar - Aligning Theoretical Knowledge with Professional Practice

Code-switching among Military Cadet Officers during Group Interaction

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Abstract

In Malaysia, code-switching is commonly used in communication. This study focuses on the act of code-switching among military cadet officers in English language class, specifically during group interactions. It will also discuss the cadet officers' perceptions on code-switching during group interactions. 30 Cadet Officers from National Defence University Malaysia (NDUM) with different L1 (Malay, Mandarin and Tamil) were chosen in this study and data were collected through group discussion and interviews. The conversations were then transcribed and analysed. In the study, it was found that both gender and L1 do influence the code-switching behaviour of the cadet officers during group interactions. L1 however has shown a greater influence in comparison to gender. Overall, students made more switches when they were placed among cadets who speak the same L1. A more effective interaction among the cadets was noted when they were placed among groups of the same gender and speak the same L1.

Keywords: Code-switching; military cadet officers; Malay language; English language

1. Introduction

Code-switching has become a common observable pattern in most multilingual contexts today. This trend has been seen taking place among Malaysian Bilingual speakers as part of their daily communication mode. The act of code-switching especially in multilingual or bilingual communities however, is not novel.

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Defined as the switching between two or more languages in a speaker's speech by Wardaugh [20], code-switching has become an important part of our lives today. *Bahasa rojak* is the term used to refer to the situation where any two or more languages are mixed during communication, such as Manglish (Malaysian English). In Manglish, words and phrases from Malay, Mandarin, Tamil, and other languages are juxtaposed with English words [1]. Code-switching has also been seen actively taking place in our ESL classes. Various areas related to code-switching in ESL classrooms have been largely investigated, however very few have highlighted on the extent to which code-switching can be applied as a helpful teaching and learning method. This paper explores the extent to which English and BM are switched among the military cadets at National Defence University Malaysia (NDUM) especially during group interactions. It will also investigate the overall code-switching behaviour of these cadets by looking into the influence of Gender and L1 (first language) and their tendencies to trigger code-switching while they interact within their groups.

At National Defence University of Malaysia (NDUM), military cadets are exposed to basic writing and speaking skills, English for Academic Writing and English for Oral Communication as well basic reading and listening skills as a preparation for Malaysian University English Test (MUET) examinations. These cadets are required to attend a total of three hours of English lessons every week. Being a pioneer Defence University in Malaysia, the distinct teaching and learning environment, the rigid lifestyle of the cadet officers as well as their active involvement in activities or tasks outside academic hours have a large impact on the types of methods or teaching strategies used to carry out the English lessons. An important teaching method that has been adopted and applied in the teaching of English at NDUM is none other than group interaction. The concept of team work has always been of great importance to the Military. The cadets have had the idea of teamwork imposed upon them ever since the first day they were accepted into the university. Hence, adapting this as an important teaching strategy in English is considered as an effective way in learning English through group work, the cadets not only put the language they learn into practise, but they also get to share ideas and knowledge which further encourages effective learning.

While incorporating group work or group tasks into their lessons, there was a common observable behaviour noticed by the English tutors or instructors. Their observation revealed that the cadets have a high tendency to code-switch with one another frequently during informal and formal conversations. Another interesting observation made was that these cadets often hesitated to use English for their group interactions. They are very conscious about making mistakes while conversing with one another and most of the time resort to using their L1 when they discuss over activities in a group. It is extremely disappointing and demotivating for the English tutors especially when they fail to elicit an active participation among the cadets when these group activities are carried out, as whatever the cadets learn in-class sometimes becomes the only form of contact they have with their academic lessons.

Constantly, the cadets fail to participate actively in group activities as they experience a lack of proficiency in the target language, in this context the English language. Lack of fluency and experiencing language constraints may lead to code-switching [8]. In addition, Sert [18] also argues that various studies have supported the notion of not allowing the act of code-switching in English classes as it may get students too comfortable with their first language and hence overlook the various constraints and aspects of learning the target language itself. This may also indirectly lead to fluency loss of the target language as the cadets take learning the target language for granted. They believe that they can always play it 'safe' when it comes to learning the language as they have the option to switch to their mother tongue anytime. On the contrary, if code-switching is not allowed, the cadets immerse themselves in the target language completely and start using the language to communicate with one another. Comparing these two circumstances, the instructors and English language tutors at NDUM therefore face the challenge of either to allow the act of code-switching during their lessons or to emphasize on the use of the English language alone in the classroom. If at all they permit code-switching it will then be important for them to strategize the circumstances and extent to which code-switching can be permitted during their lessons.