



Codeswitching: Linguistic and literacy understanding of teaching dilemmas in multilingual classrooms



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ABSTRACT

This paper offers a linguistic background on what codeswitching (CS) is, as well as comparative models of accounting for it. The linguistic and sociolinguistic accounts are followed by a synthesis of the existing research on educational uses of CS, in both foreign language (FL), second language learning, and multilingual content area classrooms. Finally, the paper offers a recommendation based on the research synthesis and anchored in observational data from South African classrooms in the Western Cape region. The recommendation calls for careful adoption of linguistic ecology in classrooms.

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“Teacher behaviors surrounding CS are strategic in execution and often regretted on reflection.” (researcher fieldnotes, 10–11)

1. Introduction

The introductory quotation was recorded by the researcher in a Cape Town year eight science classroom where multiple languages are used between teachers and students. In circumstances like these teachers often sample from a second language while teaching in the intended language. Such was the case when observations were made of several science teachers' literacy practices in Cape Town, South Africa. These teachers taught in English and often used short phrases or sentences in Xhosa, a local heritage language. This linguistic and pedagogical strategy is called codeswitching (CS). Loosely defined, CS is the use of two or more languages, varieties, or even dialects within a single language turn. And it occurs both inside and outside of classrooms. In Cape Town, CS is ubiquitous. This manuscript emerged in reaction to and recognition of teachers' productive use of CS while they taught, as well as researchers' curiosity regarding the teachers' resistance to own their use of CS when interviewed. As such, it is not a data-based report, but rather we present a theoretical paper, with limited data used as examples. The goal of the paper is a deeper understanding through a research synthesis of the linguistic and psychological constructs that undergird CS as an educational strategy. The research synthesis results from the collaboration of a white, US literacy and linguistics researcher (first author) with a mixed-race citizen of Cape Town of Indian and Afrikaans ancestry, who is an administrator in teacher preparation (second author). Both are university personnel in their respective countries. Since neither author spoke Xhosa, we employed a bilingual translator to analyze taped lessons that provided our examples.

The following excerpts are taken from an audio recording of a Cape Town, South African science teacher's lesson on arthropods and their parasitic infestations. The lesson was presented to year eight students in a Township school. The first

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language of the teacher, Shandi, and the students is Xhosa. The lesson was conducted primarily in English, as required by national education policy. Yet, the examples show Shandi's systematic use of Xhosa in a strategy called codeswitching. (Note: Regular print indicates the use of English. ***Bold italics indicate the use of Xhosa.*** Our elaborations appear in parentheses).

T: (To whole class) How can we prevent the spread of these two diseases? (malaria, sleeping sickness)

S: Using mosquito netting.

T: You can use nets. That is true! (Teacher pause, then in Xhosa) ***Is he the only one that can remember this?***

Later, after breaking into smaller task groups, the same strategy appears.

T: Which group is doing malaria? You were doing malaria (indicating a particular group). How to prevent the spread of malaria?

S: Use stimulants. Wear long sleeve garments. Malaria cream.

T: Spraying anti-malaria drug. Is he the only one that can remember this?

The following are additional examples of codeswitching from the same lesson:

T: ***Let's continue.*** Then if the animal . . .

T: There are other examples, the flies, the mosquitoes, the tsetse flies. ***It's like a mosquito but it is small.***

T: This is how it is spread. ***Did you hear that?*** The fly comes in contact with the cholera.

2. An explanation and a social context as introduction

There are systematic ways to understand the above example, as well as in the larger set of transcribed data from the lesson. These understandings are necessarily grounded in the social circumstances in which they occurred. For us, these patterned uses of codeswitching, that is, Shandi's use of Xhosa during her lesson that was presented in English, constitute a purposeful and productive teaching strategy nested inside her intent to teach about arthropods. In the examples above, Shandi switches her language use for both classroom management and for content elaboration. According to the research reviewed in this article, these are potentially productive teaching choices. Yet, when interviewed after the lesson, she was at first hesitant to talk about her use of Xhosa during her teaching, and then after some discussion, tended to disavow any of the above instances, when they were presented to her by the observer. In this example, the native language of Shandi as well as her students is Xhosa. Therefore, her decision to codeswitch into Xhosa is done with deep knowledge of her students' uptake potential. Yet, she continues the bulk of the lesson in English.

Shandi's tendency to disavow her use of productive codeswitching (CS) strategies is not an uncommon practice (Probyn, 2009). It is rooted in both a complex of strategies that scaffold students' learning as well as in the teachers' confusions surrounding their use of CS, which are often understood by them as productive, but also an embarrassment in their instruction. These mixed values regarding teachers' own CS are supported in classroom-based research with other South African teachers' CS. Yet, in her research with Cape Town teachers, Probyn also found teachers were hesitant to discuss their CS, and when they did so, it was with a sense of culpability. But, why then does Shandi choose to mix languages within a lesson? Why does she deny doing so? Why does this dual reasoning exist in teachers' use of CS?

This paper synthesizes what the literature on CS has to say about mixing language use in educational contexts. The review of the literature was conducted subsequent to the observations and sought to understand the CS from linguistic and educational perspectives. As such, this is not a data based research paper, but rather a research review in search of possible explanations for teachers' behaviors. There are several ways to approach these persistent questions in teachers' use of CS. This paper offers a synthesis of research in the linguistic background for CS, as well as comparative models of accounting for its use. This linguistic account is followed by a synthesis of the existing research on educational uses of CS, in both foreign language (FL) second language learning (SLA) and content learning classrooms. And finally, the paper offers recommendations based on the research syntheses and provides examples from observational research conducted in Cape Town's Western Cape Secondary schools. So the paper hopes to make its argument on two levels, the general level of research on CS, and the more specific accounts of CS in the context of a Western Cape secondary science classroom.^{1 2}

¹ The details of a South African science teacher are part of larger study. The current writing uses examples from that study to elaborate the research review.

² The research for this review was conducted using JSTOR, Google Scholar, and the library holdings at University of the Western Cape. Because of the conceptual nature of the synthesis task, the authors used both data-based and theory-based pieces of work. Individual works were considered if they dealt with defining, describing, or exemplifying the use of two or more languages in a conversational turn.

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