

Multilingual switch in peer classroom interaction

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Abstract

Focusing on code-switching from conversation analysis and sociolinguistic perspectives, this paper examines interactions between 10–12-year-old language learners of immigrant origin and locally born students as they are engaging in verbal pair work. All are students attending language classes in state primary schools in Barcelona in which Catalan is the official language of the institution, Spanish is the common language of communication among students, and English is taught as a foreign language. By examining transcripts of recorded interactions between student pairs, we analyze the role played by Catalan and Spanish code-switching in the context of classes where students are studying Catalan and English. Our results show that language alternation serves to address practical issues related to the management and completion of the assigned pair activities. We will argue that, although code-switching is a resource available to students in multilingual contexts, rather than a distorting element, the implicit and non-implicit language policies in the classroom cannot be separated from the analysis of multilingual switches and the concept of plurilingual competence. © 2008 Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

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1. Introduction

Code-switching, or the use of more than one language in conversation, is a daily practice for much of the world's population and a complex and variable phenomenon. Speakers' ability to code-switch at different moments of a single conversation has been exhaustively described, initially by ethnographic linguistics (Gumperz & Hymes, 1972) and later on through the frameworks of interactional sociolinguistics and conversational analysis (Auer, 1984, 1998a).

Although sociolinguists and especially interactional sociolinguists initially focused their attention on code-switching in conversations between bilingual adults in informal settings (Blom & Gumperz, 1972; Gumperz & Hernández-Chavez, 1971), the study of language switch has subsequently expanded to include conversation (Jørgensen, 1998; Zentella, 1982, 1997) between young bilingual children, as well as more formal settings such as schools (Aguirre, 1988; Benjamin, 1996) and, more specifically, second and foreign language classrooms (Lüdi & Py, 1986; Pekarek, 1999; Nussbaum, 1990; Nussbaum & Unamuno, 2001; Unamuno, 2003).

A social perspective on language acquisition situates code-switching outside a classic focus on communicative functions to examine its relevance to the development of second language competences. Some authors (Lüdi, 1989; Py, 1994) point out that classroom code-switching represents different strategies in different communicative contexts, including *exolingual* contexts, in which the participants' competences are uneven or asymmetrical, and *bilingual*

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contexts, in which participants using more than one language have language competences that are comparable or symmetric (De Pietro, 1988: p. 77). Although this distinction between bilingual and exolingual can actually help to explain many different uses of language switch in the classroom, the literature in this area (Lüdi, 1999; Pekarek, 1999; Py, 1997) emphasizes that these are not mutually exclusive contexts but rather poles of a continuum along which speakers learn to move depending on the local activity in which they are involved.

Most studies on code-switching practices in classroom analyze conversation between teachers and learners (for example, Adendorf, 1993; Pennington, 1995), therefore relegating studies on peer code-switching to a marginal position (Reyes, 2004). Furthermore, much of the existing research on code-switching between classroom peers is based on data gathered from bilingual populations for whom the goal of interaction is to develop competence in one of their two languages, usually the educational system's official language (Canagarajah, 1995; Reyes, 2004). This is the sort of bilingual context examined in previous studies involving Catalan by, for example, Calsamiglia and Tuson (1994), Nussbaum and Unamuno (2001), Masats and Unamuno (2001), and Galindo (2006).

Other studies have worked with data gathered in foreign language classrooms, especially in English as Foreign Language classrooms. However, data for foreign languages other than English have also been analyzed, in studies like those by Apfelbaum (1992); Griggs (1997, 1999), and Nussbaum (1999).

The present article, however, has a slightly more complex focus, since it examines interactions among primary-level students with different language backgrounds who are currently attending bilingual Catalan–Spanish public schools in which English is taught as a foreign language.¹ The languages in which they code-switch are therefore not necessarily their first or family languages, but rather, in the case of immigrant children, their third or fourth ones. Our study thus looks beyond the use of two languages to multilingual patterns of language use.

In this paper, we adopt a conversational analysis approach to the study of multilingual switches occurring during pair work among students with diverse linguistic backgrounds. Our aim is to explore, through a sequential analysis, the different ways in which they exploit their plurilingual resources for accomplishing accountable actions during three different language classes (Catalan, Spanish and English) in which they have to manage different parts of school tasks and simultaneously guarantee cooperativeness and coordination in the dyad work.

Specifically, in this paper we contrast the students' use of these languages in order to understand (a) their role in the accomplishment of interaction; (b) the way that the alternate use of three languages can be exploited with practical (e.g. solve lexical or grammatical problems) and symbolic finalities (e.g. put in relevance a specific identity), and (c) the different categorizations of these three languages in each classroom. Finally, we explore the relationship between language alternation and the development of plurilingual competences, in particular looking at the way in which the immigrant students learn code-switching from their classmates, as a means for both discourse-related and participant-related uses.

2. Code-switching in the classroom

Research on code-switching in the classroom has tended to focus on the role of language alternation in the restructuring of participants' linguistic and communicative repertoires (Nussbaum & Unamuno, 2001). Code-switching has thus been conceptualized as a resource available to learners that indexes the processes through which learners acquire, select and use new knowledge. As we will argue in the present paper, in order to examine language switching in the classroom context it is necessary to undertake a detailed analysis of the practical activities speakers engage in, focusing on the use of their linguistic repertoires. Moreover, it is relevant to analyze the way the participants sometimes exploit the differences between languages (i.e. code-switching), and sometimes exploit other possibilities of their available verbal resources, such as the use of mixing forms (i.e. code-mixing) or forms that are valid in more than one language.

Following Gumperz (1982) and Auer (1984, 1998a, 1998b), we have adopted a qualitative approach to multilingual conversation in which the organization of interactions plays a key role. In our view, the conversational moment when code-switching takes place and the nature of the communicative activity being undertaken are very important elements in the situated understanding of this particular language use. One distinction proposed by Gumperz in this sociolinguistic and interactionist tradition regarding code-switching is between *situational* and *metaphorical* code-

¹ Catalonia is an autonomous region within the Spanish state. The autonomous government is responsible for public education in the region.

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