

Codeswitching in the primary EFL classroom in China – Two case studies

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Abstract

This paper presents the results of a small-scale study of codeswitching (CS) between Chinese and English in primary English classrooms with a view to informing classroom interaction with young learners of English as a Foreign Language (EFL). It analyzes CS of two teachers participating in the Primary English Curriculum Innovation (PECI) project in Beijing, which adopts a holistic approach to innovation and implementation of curriculum. The data consist of 20 videoed lessons, covering lessons from grade 1 to grade 4. The findings comprise syntactical identification of the switches and the pedagogical and social functions that these switches serve.

The conclusions are: (1) CS is a discourse strategy that teachers use for promoting classroom interaction and ensuring efficient classroom management. (2) A suitable quantity of CS use helps cultivate and reinforce good habits of learning and foster a close student-teacher relationship. (3) Teachers have the ability to instruct in the target language; only when occasions call for efficient instruction do they turn to L1. (4) The decrease of CS over the years proves the efficiency of a holistic approach to curriculum innovations in the fulfillment of education objectives at the time of curriculum change.

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1. Introduction

Codeswitching (CS) is a common phenomenon of language contact in bilingual, multilingual and even monolingual societies. It is generally understood as “the alternative use by bilinguals (or multilinguals) of two or more languages in the same conversation” (Muysken, 1995, p. 7), or “in the unchanged setting, often within the same utterance” (Bullock and Toribio, 2009, p. 2). Myers-Scotton (1997) indicates that codes involved in CS are not necessarily those of standard languages and expands the term to subsume switching between languages (Azuma, 2001; Platt and Webber, 1980; Treffers-Daller, 1998, etc.), dialects (Alfonzetti,

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1998; Blom and Gumperz, 1972; Scotton and Yule, 1977, etc.), styles and registers (Farris, 1992). In this paper, “code” is used to refer to two distinct languages, English and Chinese.

Discussion of codeswitching in the classroom context in China draws data mostly from classrooms of adults or secondary levels while codeswitching in classrooms of young learners is under-explored. Do teachers of young learners engage in CS behaviors? And if they switch, what purposes and what functions do their switches serve? Are they beneficial or detrimental to students’ language learning? By drawing on data from two teachers’ classroom talk collected from a curriculum innovation project over 4 years’ time, we hope to find answers to these questions. We also attempt to describe and explain CS in the primary EFL classroom in the context of China.

2. Literature review

A large number of classroom CS studies, as opposed to social CS or general CS in no specific context, center around functions and motivations for juxtapositions of two languages. They have been influenced by research in classroom interaction, second language acquisition, teacher talk, conversational analysis, pragmatics and the ethnography of communication. Many researchers devote their attention to bilingual classroom CS of various types, while only a few study CS in the foreign language classroom. CS in the foreign language is a more complicated issue, as the foreign language is both the means and the end of such classrooms.

2.1. Types of CS

Based on observations of many cases of CS, Sankoff and Poplack (1981) identify three types of CS syntactically, namely, tag-switching, intra-sentential switching and inter-sentential switching. Tag-switching, emblematic switching or extra-sentential switching (Muysken, 1995), involves the insertion of a tag or a short fixed phrase in one language into an utterance which is otherwise entirely in the other language. Inter-sentential switching involves a switch at a clause or sentence boundary, where each clause or sentence is either in one language or the other. It may also occur when one speaker takes up where another leaves off. Intra-sentential switching refers to switching within the clause or sentence boundary. This form involves the greatest syntactic risk and requires that the speaker be fluent in both languages.

2.2. Development of classroom CS research

According to the understanding of Simon (2001), there were three phases of classroom CS summarized in Martin-Jones (1995), shifting from the distribution of L1 and FL to the micro-ethnographic study of classroom discourse. Early studies on CS, the first phase, attracted attention in the bilingual education programs for linguistic minority pupils in the United States in the 1970’s and early 1980’s. These studies were quantitative in nature and focused on the influence of CS in bilingual classroom communication on children’s linguistic development. The second phase originated from the research conducted by Milk (1981, 1982) and Guthrie (1984), both cited in Martin-Jones (1995, p. 92). They first broke through the purely quantitative study of classroom communication by using audio-recordings and descriptive framework. They started to pay attention to the ways in which teachers and students fulfill tasks with two languages. Values conveyed through code choice also became more significant for them. Guthrie’s (1984, p. 45) study identified several communicative functions of L1 usage in the classrooms: (1) for translation; (2) as a “we” code; (3) for procedures and directions; (4) for clarification; and (5) to check understanding.

The third phase was ushered in by the distinctly ethnographic approach adopted originally by Zentella (1981) and Erikson et al. (1983) in Martin-Jones (1995, p. 95). Within this approach, the researchers were engaged in detailed situational analysis of teaching/learning events with regard to both the linguistic and cultural background of the participants. Zentella (1981) also identified the pragmatic functions of CS, namely, to alleviate the effect of admonition, to make asides, and to make metalinguistic commentaries. This identification, like the one in Guthrie (1984), does not distinguish between communicative acts realized through code choices for pedagogical or social reasons. Merritt et al.’s (1992) study in Kenyan primary classrooms found

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