Pedagogical Functions of Teachers’ Code-switching in Malaysian English as a Second Language Classrooms

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Abstract. One of the unique features of Malaysian English as a Second Language (ESL) classrooms is that the teachers and students are bilinguals where code-switching is second to nature. However, lack of attention has been given to the issue of how teachers can strategically employ code-switching in the classrooms. This study sought to identify the functions of code-switching in Malaysian ESL classrooms. Five teachers of five different ESL classrooms from one public secondary school in Johor Bahru, Malaysia participated in this study. The data was collected through classroom audio-recordings and analysed using thematic coding system based on Hymes (1962) framework. Findings revealed that all Hymes’s seven basic functions were present. This study provides insights for actual code-switching practice among both practicing and trainee teachers in the hope to maximize the teaching and learning experience in ESL classrooms.

Keywords: ESL classroom, code-switching, bilingualism

1 Introduction

One of the unique features of Malaysian English as a Second Language (ESL) classrooms is that the teachers and students are bilinguals where code-switching is second to nature. Zabrodskaja (2007) suggests that code-switching is inevitable in the classroom where the teacher and students share the same language. However, lack of attention has been given to the issue of how teachers can strategically employ code-switching in the classrooms. As a result, teachers are unaware of the various positive pedagogical functions that code-switching can offer but still aimlessly employ code-switching (Sert, 2005). Therefore, this study sought to identify the functions of teachers’ code-switching in Malaysian ESL classrooms.

2 Review of Literature

2.1 Code-switching in ESL classrooms

Although some scholars like Nunan (1991), Macdonald (1993), Cook (2001) and Sharma (2006) are not too keen on the use of first language (L1) in second language (L2) classrooms, recent findings suggest that teachers can play an active role in preventing the long term shortcomings of code-switching and exploit the benefits of code-switching in second language classrooms (Üstünel and Seedhouse, 2005; Ahmad and Jusoff, 2009; Shin, 2010). Ostovar-Namaghi and Norouzi (2015) argue that rejection towards the use of L1 in L2 classrooms are merely based on prejudice and L1 can be a valuable resource to aid in L2 teaching and learning process. Failure to acknowledge the positive role of code-switching in assisting bilinguals’ language learning will reflect on the students’ overall motivation and language performance (Tariq et al, 2013). Due to its positive relationship with bilingualism (Nguyen, 2013), code-switching can also be viewed as a good communicative tool to be used in L2 classrooms especially when both teachers and students are bilinguals who share the same L1. In this case, teachers can manipulate code-switching to serve various pedagogical functions such as to help increase the success of second language teaching and learning (Uys and Dulm, 2009).

2.2 Functions on Code-switching

2.2.1 Hymes (1962) Framework

Hyme’s (1962) framework acts as the primary reference when coding the functions of code-switching in this study. This framework was selected as it is closely related to Hymes’ theory on the functions in speech events in his study of The Ethnography of Speaking (Hymes, 1962). Since this study takes a perspective of code-switching in speaking, this framework seems to be the most relevant as it focuses on verbal communication. Hyme’s framework outlines 7 basic functions as listed below:

- a) Expressive (Emotive) function
- b) Directive (Conative, Pragmatic, Rhetorical, Persuasive) function
- c) Poetic function
- d) Contact function
- e) Metalinguistic function
- f) Referential function
- g) Contextual (Situational) function
Table 1 below provides simple definition of each function listed in Hymes (1962) framework.

Table 1. Explanation of Hymes (1962) framework

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No</th>
<th>Function</th>
<th>Definition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Expressive</td>
<td>Expressive function refers to the use of code-switching to express strong feelings and emotions into the speech.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Directive</td>
<td>To effectively grab the students’ attention towards the teacher’s suggestions or attention</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Poetic</td>
<td>To deliver poetic purposes such as making jokes, telling stories, and inserting Bahasa Malaysia sayings or quotations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Contact</td>
<td>To check the attention of the students during communication</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Metalinguistic</td>
<td>To further explain definition of terms, paraphrasing other people’s words and some metaphors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Referential</td>
<td>To make reference in another language for example L1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Contextual</td>
<td>To provide contextual information towards the other interlocutor</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

3 Methodology

This study was qualitative in nature where data was gathered from audio recordings of five teachers of five different ESL classrooms from one public secondary school in Johor Bahru, Malaysia. Code-switching has been defined as the alternating use of two languages in a single speech turn in Malaysian ESL classrooms where English and Bahasa Malaysia (BM) being the focus of the study. The switch ranges from an alternation of a single word to the change from L2 to L1 in the whole sentence or the whole speech turn. The data was then analysed using thematic coding system based on Hymes (1962) framework.

4 Findings and Discussion

The findings revealed that teachers employed code-switching in Malaysian ESL classrooms to serve different purposes.

Table 2 below provides some examples of actual code-switching done by teachers to serve the different speech functions as listed in Hymes (1962) framework.

Table 2. Examples of teacher’s code-switching according to Hymes (1962) framework

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No</th>
<th>Function</th>
<th>Example of code-switching</th>
<th>Translation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Directive</td>
<td>Teacher 4: Tulis T kalau ayat dia betul, talis F kalau ayat dia salah.</td>
<td>Teacher 4: Write T if the sentence in correct, write F if the sentence is incorrect.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Code-Switching Function</th>
<th>Sample Dialogue</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Contact</td>
<td>Teacher 2: <em>Ada kesalahan? Takde kan?</em> Teacher 4: Scorpions are dangerous. <em>You cannot just say danger. But since this is just a trial examination, I give 1 mark for you, Zaki.</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Metalinguistic</td>
<td>Teacher 1: <em>Birds tidak dimasukkan dalam sangkar. Atau sarang.</em> Teacher 5: <em>The objective is to support greener and healthier living. A life that is...not greenish. A life which is more nature friendly. Okay, nowadays we use a lot of chemicals, am I right? So we want to be environment friendly. Use natural products. Do you know what natural is?</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Referential</td>
<td>Teacher 2: <em>What is this item? Ini barang apa nama dia?</em> Teacher 4: <em>Apa baki dia?</em> Teacher 5: <em>Salty, right? Masin.</em></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Although some of the code-switching occurrences were found to be serving two or more functions at the same time, the most common functions of code-switching found in the study were Metalinguistic and Referential where teachers switched to L1 to provide the meaning of a word or explaining a certain part of a text. Due to the students’ low level of proficiency and limited vocabulary, L1 acted as the bridge that links the students understanding between L1 and L2. This finding corroborates with Ahmad and Jusoff (2009) who suggested that teachers’ code-switching is significantly associated with students’ learning success and are appreciated by students with low level of language proficiency.

Another notable discovery from this study is that teachers commonly employed code-switching to deliver Expressive function. They use it mainly to express negative feelings like scolding or nagging the students. Expressing positive emotion like praising on the other hand, was done purely in L2. This contradicts to the study done in Iran by Rezvani and Rasekh (2011) who found that code-switching is used to express both positive and negative emotions. This difference can be accounted to the difference in the cultural background where in Malaysian culture, teachers do not normally give compliments very easily. Hence, teachers naturally do not find the need to praise in L1.

5 Conclusion and Recommendation

This study revealed that code-switching does have a place in Malaysian ESL classrooms. It also suggests that teachers spontaneously use L1 to assist L2 learning at their discretion. Hence, more attention need to be put on the effective code-switching practice among both practicing and trainee teachers in the hope to optimize their teaching and learning experience in ESL classrooms.
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References


