

RECONCEPTUALIZING AND UTILIZING LANGUAGE SWITCHING IN TEFL/TESOL

By Asst. Prof. Dr. Sureepong Phothongsunan

Abstract

Code switching, alternating back and forth between two or more languages in the course of conversation, is a verbal skill that requires a large degree of linguistic competence in more than one language. This article discusses notions about the exercise of code switching as to what extent it can be practically used, especially in TEFL/TESOL. The interplay between code switching and interference in foreign/second language learning will be first presented. Subsequently, code switching will be analyzed, restrictions to secure the effective use of code switching pointed out, as well as its usefulness discussed. This is followed by the writer's stance on a boon attached to its suitable application in foreign/second language teaching. The article ends with an impression that when code switching is employed, it should not always be seen as intolerable interference, predominantly when keenly adopted as a communicative tool.

Introduction: Code Switching and Interference

Code switching may be considered a support or an extension to language for bilingual speakers even though from other perspectives it may be regarded as a language barrier, depending on the situation and context in which it occurs. The switching occurs within such hypothesized wide-ranging constraints that it may be integrated into conversations in a particular manner (Poplack, 1980; Cook, 1991). On this basis, given that it occurs within a particular pattern, the potential for code switching to interfere with a language exists. Berthold, Mangubhai & Batorowicz (1997) point out that interference may be seen as the conversion of elements of one language to another at various levels, be it phonological, grammatical, lexical or

orthographical. Phonological interference is defined as items including foreign accent such as stress, rhyme, intonation and speech sounds from L1 influencing L2. L1 affecting L2 in terms of word order, use of pronouns and determinants, tense and mood is referred to as grammatical interference. Interference at a lexical level provides for the loaning of words from one language and converting them to sound more natural in another while orthographic interference includes the spelling of one language altering another.

Code Switching Analysis and Usefulness

Crystal (1987) puts forward that code, or language, switching occurs when an individual who is bilingual alternates between two languages during his/her speech with another bilingual person. A person who is bilingual may be said to be one who is able to communicate, to varying degrees, in L2. This includes those who make occasional use of L2, are able to use L2 but have not for some time or those who have extensive skills in L2 (Crystal, *ibid*). This type of alteration, or code switching, between languages occurs commonly among bilinguals and may take a number of forms, including alteration of sentences, phrases from both languages connecting each other as well as switching in a long description. The definition of code switching is also supplemented by Berthold, Mangubhai and Bartorowicz (*ibid*) with the view that it occurs where speakers change from one language to another in the middle of their conversations.

There are a number of possible explanations for the switching from one language to another (Crystal, *ibid*.) The first is the notion that a speaker may not be able to express him/herself in one language so he/she switches to the other to compensate for the deficiency. As a result, the speaker may be urged to speak in the other language for a moment. This type of code switching tends to occur when the speaker is frustrated, tired or distracted in some manner. Secondly, switching commonly occurs when an individual wishes to express commonality with a particular social group. Rapport is established between the speaker and the listener when the listener responds with a similar switch. This type of switching may also be employed to exclude others who do not speak L2 from a conversation. The final reason for the switching behavior is the alteration that takes place when the speaker wishes to convey his/her attitude to the listener. Where monolingual speakers can communicate these attitudes by

way of variation in the level of formality in their speech, bilingual speakers can convey the same by code switching. Crystal (ibid.) suggests that where two bilingual speakers are accustomed to conversing in a particular language, switching to the other is bound to create a special effect. All of these notions suggest that code switching may be used as a socio-linguistic tool by bilingual speakers.

The writer sees that code switching should not be seen as a bona fide language interference on the basis that it supplements speech. Where it is used due to an inability of expression, code switching offers a continuity in verbal communication rather than presenting an interference in language. The socio-linguistic benefits have also been identified as a means of communicating solidarity, or affiliation to a particular social group, where code switching should be viewed from the perspective of providing a linguistic advantage rather than an obstruction to communication. Moreover, code switching enables a speaker to express attitudes and emotions using a technique available to those who are bilingual and thus serves to advantage the speaker. Utilising L2, then, allows speakers to enhance the impact of their speech and use it in an effective manner.

Cook (1991), however, points out that to ensure the effective use of code switching, there are two main restrictions. The first is the free morpheme constraint. This constraint suggests that a speaker may switch language between a word and its endings only if the word is pronounced as if it were in the language of the ending. The second constraint is referred to as the equivalence constraint. This constraint is characterised by the notion that the switch can come at a point in the sentence where it does not infringe on the grammar of either language (Cook. Ibid.)

Various degrees of code switching may also be used between bilingual interlocutors depending on the person being addressed, such as family, friends, officials, students, superiors and depending on the location, such as church, home, school, or workplace (Crystal, 1987). The implication here is that there are patterns which are followed, reflecting when it is appropriate to code switch in relation to the addressee and location. These patterns are the established norm for that particular social group and serve to ensure appropriate language use. Interestingly, Gal (1979), Bell (1984) and Milroy (1987) all suggest that code switching occurs so naturally and unobtrusively that it is not an interference to language but rather a

verbal mechanism of presenting an individual's social standing with regards to a particular conversational participant. As such, code switching performs a socio-linguistic function.

Although switching languages during a conversation may be disruptive to the listener when the speaker switches due to an inability to express her/himself, it does provide an opportunity for language development. It is arguable that language development takes place through samples of language which are appropriate and code switching may be signaling the need for provision of appropriate samples. The listener, in this case, is able to provide translation into L2, thus providing a learning and developing activity. This will also later allow for a lessened amount of switching and less subsequent interference as time progresses. Also, if one sees code switching as two languages to be kept separate and distinct, it would then create a barrier to interference. This is on the basis that if an individual code switches, he/she will not try to make up their own variations of the words they are unable to correctly say, thus preventing interference at a phonological level. Language would also not be subject to using them out of grammatical context and would not be subject to interference at a lexical level or with orthography. These principles may also be applied in the L2 classroom.

Code Switching in EFL/ESL Pedagogy

Cook (1991) asserts that code switching may be integrated into the activities used for teaching L2. At beginners' level, students may use L1 to obtain information from materials such as a travel brochure or a telephone message to answer comprehension questions in L2. At advanced levels, the student may be required to research a topic and provide a report in L2. This approach uses code switching as a foundation for the development of an L2 learner who can stand between the two languages and use whichever is most appropriate to the situation rather than becoming an imitation native speaker (Cook, *ibid*).

For L2 teachers, they can, to some extent, use code switching to their advantage in L2 teaching. They could start the lesson in L1 and then move into L2 and back as appropriate (Cook, *ibid*.). This could make the lesson as communicative as possible. However, the context of teaching and learning is also to be taken into consideration as some schools/universities do not officially allow L1 to be used in L2 classrooms. Therefore, in this case using code switching is subject to teacher consideration and discretion as well as appropriate-

ness of situations. From the writer's point of view, this approach as a minimum gives a chance to teachers to use languages at will within each lesson. With the careful monitoring of its suitable use, the teacher can switch languages at certain key points, such as during important concepts, when students are getting distracted, during revisions or when students are commended and complained about. On such basis, switching may be used as an effective teaching strategy for L2 learning.

Conclusion

Language switching emerges when a speaker needs to compensate for some difficulty, express solidarity, convey an attitude or show social respect (Crystal, 1987; Berthold, Mangubhai and Batorowicz, 1997). It may facilitate language development as a mechanism for providing language models and may also be utilized as a teaching method for teaching L2 (Cook, 1989; 1991). However, the extent for code switching to cause unproductive interference in a language exists if it is not employed carefully as a proper teaching method. It can be concluded that when code switching is used in L2 learning to compensate for a language difficulty, it should not always be viewed as totally undesirable interference particularly when it is employed as a socio-linguistic implement.

References

- Bell, A. (1984). Language Style as Audience Design. *Language in Society*, 13(2), 145-204.
- Berthold, M., Mangubhai, F., & Batorowicz, K. (1997). *Bilingualism & Multiculturalism: Study Book*. University of Southern Queensland: Toowoomba, QLD.
- Cook, V. (1989). Reciprocal Language Teaching: Another Alternative. *Modern English Teacher*, 16(3), 48-53.
- Cook, V. (1991). *Second Language Learning and Language Teaching*. Edward Arnold/Hodder Headline Group: Melbourne.
- Crystal, D. (1987). *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of Language*. Cambridge University Press: Cambridge.

- Gal, S. (1979). *Language Shift: Social Determinants of Linguistic Change in Bilingual Austria*. Academic Press: New York.
- Milroy, L. (1987). *Observing & Analyzing Natural Language: A Critical Account of Sociolinguistic Method*. Blackwell Publishers: Oxford.
- Poplack, S. (1980). Sometimes I'll start a sentence in English y termino en espanol. *Linguistics*, 18, 581-616.

Asst. Prof. Dr. Sureepong Phothongsunan has served AU since 1998. He earned a doctorate in TEFL (Teaching English as a Foreign Language) from the University of Exeter, UK. His TESL Graduate Diploma and M.A. in TESL were from the University of Central Missouri, USA. His interests are in the domains of ESP, EFL, and educational research.