

The Purposes of Code-Switching and Teachers' Perceptions toward Code-Switching in Malaysian Primary Schools



Tawos Mohammadi, M. Yaqoob Seraj, Hairunnisa Ibrahim, Nurul Farhanah Abdul Hadi

Abstract- This particular study is conducted to find out the purposes of teachers' codeswitching in the primary schools, the perceptions of teachers toward using students' first language in the classrooms, and the amount of the usage of codeswitching in primary schools. A total number of 82 primary school English language teachers from the Johor Bahru state of Malaysia took part in this study. In order to collect comprehensive data from the participants, the researcher applied a mixed-method design. Quantitative data was collected through the Google Form questionnaire, which was sent to the teachers via WhatsApp, and Qualitative data was collected through interviews with five English language teachers of primary schools. The analysis of both types of data showed that the teachers use students' L1 for three purposes, pedagogical, administrative, and interactional, but mainly students' L1 was utilized as a pedagogical tool to facilitate language learning and as an administrative strategy to create a less threatening and learner-friendly environment. The results of the study also indicated that the majority of the teachers in the primary schools of Johor switch to students' L1 to accommodate low proficiency learners and explain difficult concepts such as grammar and vocabulary to the learners. Eighty percent of the participant agreed to minimize the use of L1 in second language learning classrooms.

Keywords: Code-switching, pedagogical code-switching, administrative code-switching, interactional code-switching

I. INTRODUCTION

English is being used as a second language in Malaysia. It has been used widely in the social setting as well as in educational settings. In many countries, English has been made compulsory in the educational curriculum and even continued to be used by the government and other institutions

nationwide. Code-switching in Malaysia is not an exception as the range of languages spoken by the various ethnic groups contribute to linguistic practices.

In second language teaching, there are many debates on the use of code-switching in language classrooms. Cook [1] suggested that the target language should be dominant in the second language classroom. It is crucial because the students need to be exposed to the target language instead of mixing two distinct languages in discourse or using students' L1 only. However, using students' L1 has significant effects on students' academic achievements. By allowing the use of students' first language, more opportunities are created for the use of the target language.

One of the significant advantages of using code-switching is that students will be able to better understand a particular topic or any required task that needed to be done in the learning process. Cook [1] explained that teachers might use L1 in order to explain the activities so that the activities are beneficial to the learners. The use of students' L1 would pave the way for negotiation, and a better understanding of the required task. Many researchers who have studied code-switching are still concerned about whether the teacher should use code-switching in their language classes or use only the target language in the class. They also want to make sure the effects of code-switching both to the students and teachers if it is integrated into the education system. The following questions are to be answered by the end of the study.

1. What are the purposes of teachers' code-switching in English language classrooms in primary schools in Johor?
2. What are teachers' perceptions of code-switching in teaching English as a second language?

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

A. Codeswitching

Code-switching has been a topic of heated debate among the educationists, particularly those who study the field of second language acquisition [2]. It is defined as the alternate use of two (or more) languages [1]. Code-switching (CS) is used for different purposes in a community. The speakers use it to adjust their language to the level of parties involved in communication [3]. The teachers use it in language classrooms as a strategy to facilitate second language learning [4].

Revised Manuscript Received on October 30, 2019.

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In addition, Polio and Duff [5] revealed in their study that the teachers used students' L1 for administrative purposes and classroom management. The literature studies show that CS is not only used as a communicative strategy to express

solidarity, emphasize, and social identity but also as an academic tool and management strategy in language classrooms among teachers. Turnbull and Arnett [6], in their study, came up with three macro-functional categories of CS in L2 classrooms: pedagogical purposes, social interactional purposes, and classroom management. These macro-functional categories were later confirmed in a study by Makulloluwa [7]. She found that CS in English language teaching occurs for three purposes: pedagogical, administrative, and interactional purposes.

B. Codeswitching for Pedagogical Purposes

Code-Switching has been studied from different angles recently. It has been a topic of debate among educationists. Since the 1990s until 2013, there has been an agreement on the effectiveness of CS in pedagogy [8]. Code-Switching occurs naturally in bilingual classrooms to facilitate second language acquisition in the short-term, but in the long-term, it may hinder language acquisition. It increases the level of learning in English language classrooms, but its untimely decrement or complete removal from the classroom will inhibit language acquisition [4]. Confirming Eldridge [4] findings, Cook [1] supported CS with the multicompetence theory. According to the theory, those who switch between codes are multicompetent, since they have the ability to accommodate two grammars in their mind. He argued that due to the multicompetence state, L2 learners have the ability to use L1 in learning of L2. Cook [1] believed that CS as a pedagogical tool in language classrooms facilitates students' learning. It is used for various purposes in bilingual classrooms such as reiteration of instructions, offering the translation of difficult words or phrases, and explanation of difficult concepts such as grammar and new vocabulary [9] – [10]. According to Kumar and Narendra [11], grammar instruction is the area with the highest use of CS, even the students with a high proficiency of TL, learn the grammar better in L1 [1]. Sometimes, CS is used due to the inability to remember the proper word or lacking language proficiency [12].

C. Codeswitching for Administrative Purpose

Code-switching accommodates the delivery of a wide range of social purposes [13]. It is used as an effective strategy for exercising classroom management [14]. The teachers switch the codes to get students' attention, particularly when cautioning a disturbing student or commenting on the behavior of the students [15]. Macaro [16] stated that CS in the classroom is used to give general instructions to the learners and to save time in conveying the instruction [9]. According to Makulloluwa [7], CS is used in low proficiency classes to seek oral feedback from the students to ascertain their comprehension and accommodate students' low language proficiency. It helps the teacher to clarify ambiguous areas, but in high-level classes, the use of L1 for administrative purposes is minimal or even non-existent in some cases. The creation of a positive, effective, less threatening, and supportive classroom

environment are among other purposes of administrative code-switching.

D. Codeswitching for Interactional Purpose

Code-switching, as a communicative strategy naturally occurs in the student-student or teacher-student interaction [17]. The speakers use it as an additional resource to deliver their message. It should not be seen as a linguistic deficiency [13]. The studies on CS show that both the teachers and the students switch codes in informal interaction to a larger extent, while formal interactions are dominated by the TL [18]. According to Makulloluwa [7], the teachers switch the codes to students' L1 for social interactional purposes in order to create a learner-friendly and stress-free classroom environment for interaction. It helps the teacher to establish a less-threatening relationship with the students in the classroom [18]–[19]. According to Cook [1], if the condition inside the classroom is more friendly, less threatening, and stress-free, it will decrease the risk of misunderstanding between teachers and students, which usually occurs due to L2 shortcomings [20]. Canagarajah [21], in his study, elaborated that the Tamil teachers switched to L1 to break the ice and establish rapport with the students. It leads to natural interaction and increases learning achievements of the students.

III. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The researcher used the mixed-method design for the current study. Purposive sampling was used because the researchers needed only the English language teachers of primary schools to participate in this study. A total number of 82 (26 males, 56 female) primary school English language teachers (ELT) working in different primary schools in the state of Johor participated in this study. The majority of the teachers (72) had a bachelor's degree in ELT, six teachers had a diploma in ELT, and four teachers had a master's degree in ELT (Fig. 1). Fifty-eight teachers had 1-5 years of teaching experience, and 24 teachers had 6 – 10 years of teaching experience. Most of the teachers (58) could speak two languages; 22 teachers could speak three languages, and only two teachers could speak four languages.

A quantitative questionnaire for this study was adopted from Chowdhury [2]. It was adapted to suit the context of the present study and meet the needs of our target community. The questionnaire had 14 including questions on teachers' background, the reasons for teachers' code-switching, and their viewpoints towards the usage of code-switching in ESL classrooms. Due to time constraints, the questionnaire was administered online through Google Form. The usage of an online questionnaire gives respondents the simplicity to answer it at their own best time. Online data collection is widely used in research studies. It has little impact on the respondent, and it is well established [22]. In order to triangulate the data, the researchers interviewed five English language teachers of primary schools as well to find out the purposes and the perceptions of teachers toward code-switching in English language classes.

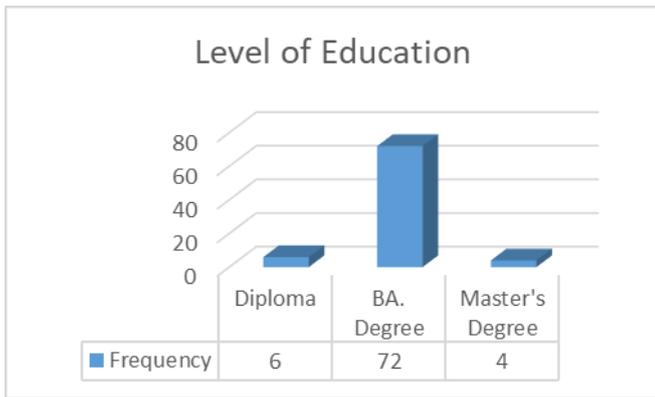


Figure 1: Education Level of the Participants

IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A total number of 40 (49%) respondents indicated that teachers should use student’s L1 while teaching a second language. However, another 42 (51 %) participants disagreed with using students’ L1 in second language classes. The participants in the interview also indicated that language classroom input should be in the target language. According to Chi [23] and Cook [1], an effective model of language use can ensure that the intended learning was successful. A total number of 66 (80 %) respondents used the first language in teaching English language classrooms, while only 16 (20 %) respondents did not use the first language in the classroom. If we see the result of the first question, we can see that there is a very small difference in the percentage of those who agreed to the use of code-switching and those who disagreed to the use of codeswitching, but in the result of the second question, we can clearly see that around 80% of the participants stated that they practically switch to students’ L1 in the class. It could be due to multiple purposes such as administrative, pedagogical or interactional purposes, which will be illustrated later based on the results from the questionnaire and interview with the teachers.

Table- I: The percentage of agreement to the use of codeswitching

No.	Codeswitching	Frequency	Percentage
1	Agreement	40	49%
2	Disagreement	42	51%
	Total	82	100%

Also, 78 (95 %) respondents agreed that code-switching in English language classes is helpful to both teachers and the students. Norrish [24] stated that teachers switch to students’ L1 when the level of English used in the textbook or taught by the teacher is beyond the learner’s level of understanding or when the teachers have exhausted the means to adjust his speech to the learner’s level. Teachers, especially in primary school, tend to code-switch according to the students’ needs, feedback, and ability to comprehend the target language. The results of the study also indicated that (Fig. 2) 66 % (54) of the respondents frequently switched the code to students’ L1 in English classrooms. None of the respondents denied the usage of L1 in the class. It demonstrates that learners can focus and participate in classroom practices and activities more successfully if the teacher switches the code. Exposure to code-switching at the early stages of learning allows the

learners to get a head start towards effective and successful learning and to gradually become users of the target language [23]-[25]. Eldridge [4] stated that codeswitching should be used judiciously and for specific pedagogic purposes at the primary level, but later on, it should be minimized to zero so that the students do not miss exposure to the target language.

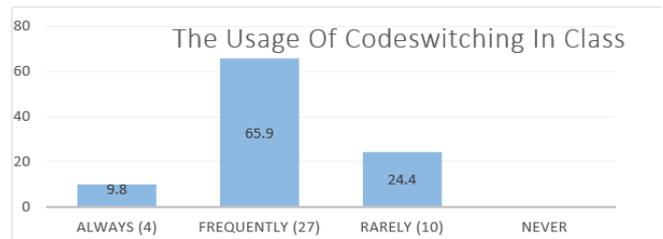


Table 2

Figure 2: The frequency of the use of codeswitching by the teachers

The analyses of the question about the purposes of code-switching in English language classes indicated that the teachers used code-switching for three purposes, namely administrative, pedagogical, and interactional purposes. The teachers in Johor primary schools used code-switching widely for pedagogical and administrative purposes. The result (Fig. 3) shows that the major purposes for which the teachers switched the codes are to explain difficult concepts such as grammar and vocabulary (pedagogical purpose) to accommodate low proficiency learners and to give more clarification to the students (Administrative purpose). Only four participants mentioned that they use code-switching for interactional purposes, such as building solidarity and intimate relationship. Generally speaking, the results indicated that code-switching helps the learners to understand teacher’s instructions, the meaning of difficult concepts, and ultimately increases the academic achievements of the learners in language classrooms.

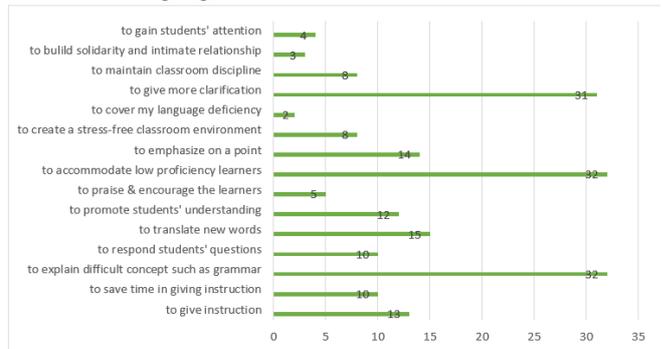


Table 3

Figure 3: The purposes of codeswitching

A considerable percentage of the (80 %) respondents agreed that they felt comfortable when they switched the code to students’ L1 in English language classrooms. The use of code-switching is directly related to the level of learners involved in the learning process. Code-switching might be a useful strategy to use in low proficiency classrooms as well as in the intermediate level classrooms [26]. Teachers, nevertheless, need to be reminded that code-switching is a tool or a strategy to ensure the transfer of comprehensible input from the teachers to the learners.



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Code-switching should be considered as a strategy to be used as a last resort. It should not be used as a teaching method, so the teacher should not feel too comfortable to use the students' L1 in English classrooms.

The use of students' L1 in large classrooms is another issue that has been discussed for a long time. The results of our study indicated that 93 % of the respondents preferred to switch often to L1 in large classrooms because, according to them, it is difficult to control a large group of learners with low proficiency in the target language, without using the first language of the students; so the answer to this question reveals that the teachers used student's first language to gain students' attention and have control over the class. Besides, in the large classrooms, it is difficult for the teachers to ensure everyone has comprehended and understood the target language; therefore, they use the first language. Seventy-four (90 %) respondents mentioned that students are the one who initiates the use of the first language in the classroom. Code-switching helped the learners to enjoy their learning due to their ability to understand teachers' input. The comprehensible input also decreases students' level of anxiety and make them feel more comfortable to learn the target language. Once they are comfortable with the environment, without any unnecessary anxiety, the learners can concentrate and participate in the classroom practices and activities more successfully [23]-[27]. The respondents' personal opinion on code-switching in English language classes shows a significant connection between teachers' code-switching and students' level of achievement.

The results from the interview with the teachers show that there is a need for using students' first language in second language classrooms. Most of the teachers in the interview asserted that code-switching is an indispensable part of English language classrooms, particularly for low proficiency learners. From the interview data, we found out that teachers in Johor primary schools use code-switching for the purpose of accommodating low proficiency learners and enhancing students' understanding of the topics being discussed. Many of these teachers believe that code-switching is helpful and enhances students' learning. They believe that code-switching should be used in case of need as a last resort, but overuse should be avoided. Most of the comments from the teachers clarify that the teachers agree to the minimization of code-switching in second language classrooms.

Overall, the results from the interview data and the questionnaires demonstrated that code-switching is widely used by the teachers in primary schools of Johor. It is used for administrative purposes to exercise the issues pertaining to classroom management, make the learners feel relaxed, and creating a stress-free classroom environment. It is also used for pedagogical purposes to explain the meaning of difficult words, grammatical points, and the differences between Malay and English language grammar. Besides, many teachers use code-switching for interactional purposes in order to establish rapport with the learners. According to the results of the study, code-switching is least used for the function of giving instructions to complete the tasks. It can be seen that code-switching is used by the teachers to perform various classroom functions. The results show that

code-switching was used for all three macro purposes suggested by [6].

V. CONCLUSION

Code-Switching is a natural process and commonly occurs in bilingual and multilingual communities. It is used in education, particularly in language teaching classrooms, for different purposes. Teachers use it as a pedagogical tool for enhancing students' level of achievement [28]. The results of the current study revealed that codeswitching is a prevalent phenomenon and most widely used in Johor primary schools for different purposes. Code-switching is used in Johor primary schools by teachers to give more clarifications and explain difficult concepts to the students. It is also used to accommodate low proficiency learners in the class.

The teachers in Johor primary schools expressed a positive perception toward the use of L1 in the classroom; in the meantime, most of them agreed that teachers should use the target language in the classroom. The participants of the study stated that they feel comfortable with using students' first language, and this helps them increase the level of students' understanding. Using codeswitching for the purpose of establishing rapport with the learners, and giving instruction to complete the tasks are among other purposes of codeswitching that the teachers used it.

VI. LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

It is essential if future studies are conducted on the use of the first language in second language learning classrooms in all states of Malaysia. It would give the policymakers and the educationist a broader view of the importance of code-switching in language classrooms. It will convince the policymakers to formalize the use of first language at least in the primary schools.

VII. RECOMMENDATIONS

The use of code-switching in English language learning classrooms is indispensable. It should be used in case of need as a last resort, but according to Eldridge [4], its use should be judicious and base on the need for pedagogic purposes. Secondly, code-switching should be used only in classes where the students have only one common language. If it is used in the classes with more than one common language, in this case, some of the learners will feel ignored. Thirdly, code-switching is a pedagogic tool in the classroom, but exposure to the target language is considered more valuable. Therefore, the use of students' first language should be minimized, and the use of the target language should be maximized. Fourth, untimely removal of students' first language from the classroom will negatively affect students' achievement; therefore, it is advised not to remove the use of the first language as long as the students' comprehension of the target language has not been improved enough to catch the language instruction easily.

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