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CODE-SWITCHING IN THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE CLASSROOMS IN KUCHING SECONDARY SCHOOLS

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to study the use of code-switching by TESL trainees from a local higher learning institution who underwent teaching practice in Kuching schools. It investigated their perceptions towards the use of code-switching and the code-switching functions in their English lesson. The findings indicated the teachers' perceptions towards code-switching influenced their frequency of code-switching in class. Teachers with positive perception towards code-switching code-switched more often in class and vice versa. Six functions of code-switching in the English lesson identified were revoking, calling attention, personalisation, resource, need analyst, and communication facilitator. The most common function of code-switching in the English lesson was acting as resource. Seven out of nine of the trainee teachers were found to have code-switched in their English lessons which suggests that code-switching in the English lesson is a common phenomenon. Therefore, code-switching should not be viewed as interference in the English lesson. Instead, it should be viewed as an alternative approach to or technique of the teaching of English. Teachers code-switched in the English lesson to fulfill six code-switching functions in the English lesson. Teachers could consider the different functions of code-switching in the English lesson and utilise it as an approach to teaching English to add to the variety of teaching techniques available to them.



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INTRODUCTION

There is considerable amount of literature available that supports the monolingual principle of teaching a language (Dulay, Burt, & Krashen, 1982; Swain, 1982; Willis, 1981 cited in Lin, n.d.). Hence, the majority of Teaching of English as a Second Language (TESL) programmes provide their trainees with exposure to the monolingual principle of language teaching and the latest methodologies such as communicative language teaching. Upon completion of the programme, these TESL trainees are posted to schools where they are faced with the outstanding feat of teaching students with proficiency in English ranging from high to those with limited exposure to the language. Under such circumstances, some of them are thrown into situations where they are unable to fully utilise the methodologies that they have been trained with and they resort to strategies such as code-switching – a practice that goes against the monolingual principle of language teaching that teacher trainees have been exposed to.

The question of whether English language teachers should code-switch in their lessons has been a constant debate (Ben-Zeef, 1977, Bialystok, 1987, Doyle, 1978, Ianco-Worrall, 1973, Reynold, 1928, Saer, 1963 cited in Grosjean, 1982; Pearl & Lambert, 1962 cited in De Klerk, 1995; Penafiorida, 1996). Code-switching goes against the monolingual principle and communicative language teaching (Lin, n.d.; Richards & Rodgers, 1986) that stresses on using only the target language in class. In addition, Montague and Zaragosa (1999) argued that teachers who code-switch, may also end up invalidating the second language of students rather than helping them to learn. Other studies maintained code-switching by teachers in their lessons had negative effects on language development, educational attainment, cognitive growth and intelligence of students (Reynold, 1928, Saer, 1963 cited in Grosjean, 1982). Generally, these research findings point to the adverse effects of teachers code-switching in a language classroom because it reduces the students' opportunity to use the target language for communicative purposes.

The following section explains the socio-cultural context that makes code-switching a natural phenomenon in multilingual speech communities.

Code-switching in Multilingual Communities

In Malaysia, bilingualism and code-switching appears to be a norm since most people speak two or more languages at home, in school and elsewhere. A bilingual is a person who is capable of at least communicating in both the first language and a second language to a certain extent (Skiba, 1997). This includes people who are able to use a second language but have not done so for quite some time creating what is called a dormant language phenomenon who makes irregular use of the second language, and those who have considerable skills and proficiency in the second language (Crystal, 1987 cited in Skiba, 1997). Code-switching is thus long dominant in both formal and informal settings by professionals, young adults and even children at the age of four (David, 2003). It is no longer just a norm for Malaysians to code-switch but rather code-switching itself has become a part of the Malaysian unique speech style (ibid).

In countries where English is taught as a second language, code-switching is a common social phenomenon among students (Penafiorida, 1996) and Malaysian classrooms as the microcosm of the society, are no exception. As such, teaching in this context, TESL trainees may not be able to isolate themselves from such a social norm.

Cases of students having low level of English proficiency to comprehend a teacher's input or students being too reluctant to participate in learning because they feel incompetent in the English language learning environment are common to almost all English language teachers. Should the teachers code-switch to make themselves understood? Or should the language classroom be an English-only environment and different from the wider socio-cultural context?

Code-switching by English Language Teachers

Contrary to research evidence cited earlier on the adverse effects of code-switching on language learning, a considerable amount of literature have maintained that code-switching by teachers in their lessons have positive effects on the learning process (Ben-Zeef, 1977; Bialystok, 1987; Doyle, 1978; Ianco-Worrall, 1973; Pearl & Lambert, 1962 cited in De Klerk, 1995). For example code-switching in class helps students to understand better, motivates them to learn, helps maintain discipline, helps to give individual help to especially weak students, saves time, and helps students enrich their general knowledge (Ho & Van Naerssen, 1986 cited in Lin, n.d.). Another positive point about code-switching in classroom is that it fulfills the different role-relationships played by the teacher and the students within the classroom (Lin, n.d.).

To bring the case closer to home, code-switching in the classroom is a strategy to "alleviate the pressure of linguistic environment in the country" in Brunei (Clemencia, 1996). The study reported that a shift from mother tongue to the second language instruction can be "psychologically stressful" (ibid: p. 146). Thus, Brunei teachers tend to "cushion" this by code-switching between Brunei Malay, Bahasa Melayu and English (ibid: p. 146). It lowers the psychological load of both the teachers and the students by exploring all the linguistic resources available for both the teachers and the students (ibid).

As stated by Clemencia (ibid), code-switching in the classroom also helps to reduce the artificiality of the classroom experience with a more natural conversation between the teacher and the students. He also suggested the popular use of code-switching among Brunei teachers was due to the fact that it was the most economical strategy to negotiate the subject matter considering the teachers' constraints such as topics to cover, time available, teachers and students' language proficiency, and et cetera (ibid).

The question now is no longer focusing on whether English teachers should code-switch in English lessons but has moved on to