

Notes on Algerian EFL Classroom Conversation : Towards a Systemic Functional Linguistic Strategy

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Abstract :

This paper deals mainly with the influence of code switching on the comprehension and the lexical acquisition of EFL learners. It aims at determining that code switching, which is considered as a social phenomenon, can be used as a learning strategy that enhances the English language learning. To reach this end, two questionnaires have been administered to fifty four students and ten teachers, respectively, at the department of English at Tlemcen University. The analysis of the findings shows that code switching develops the learners' language skills and improves the understanding of the students. Besides, code switching helps the teachers in conveying the meaning easily. As a result, language shift in EFL classrooms ameliorates the learning and it can be an efficient learning strategy if rationally used.

Keywords : code switching, Algerian learner, strategy, phenomenon

Résumé :

Cet article traite principalement l'influence de l'alternance codique sur la compréhension et l'acquisition lexicale des apprenants algériens de la langue anglaise. Son objectif est de déterminer que le changement de code, considéré comme un phénomène social, peut être utilisé comme une stratégie d'apprentissage qui améliore l'apprentissage de la langue anglaise. À cette fin, deux questionnaires ont été distribués à cinquante-quatre étudiants et dix enseignants, respectivement, au département d'anglais de l'Université de Tlemcen. L'analyse des résultats montre que le changement de code développe les compétences linguistiques des apprenants et améliore la compréhension de ceux-ci. En outre, la commutation de code aide les enseignants à transmettre facilement le sens. En conséquence, le changement de langue dans les classes d'anglais langue seconde améliore l'apprentissage et constitue une stratégie d'apprentissage efficace en cas d'utilisation rationnelle.

Mots-clés : alternance codique, l'apprenant algérien, stratégie, phénomène

Introduction

One of the strategies that are used to make learning more effective in second and foreign language classes is the situation of shifting between languages among teachers and students. That is they express their ideas and thoughts by selecting different languages. This act

refers to the phenomenon of code switching which attracted the attention of many scholars.

In this paper, I try to figure out if the use of code switching in Algerian EFL classrooms enhances or deters the learning of English; for that, a research question has been raised:

Does code switching enhance or inhibit the Algerian student's English learning ?

The use of code switching in the classrooms should be utilized as a strategy in ELT classroom.

The above statement incites the researcher to investigate the influence of code switching on the comprehension and the lexical acquisition of EFL learners. I attempt to show the weaknesses and strengths in using code switching as a strategy in EFL Algerian classroom.

In the case of Algeria where English is the second foreign language, the only place that permits learners to speak English is English as a foreign language classrooms. To overcome the difficulties faced by the English language learners that are due to the linguistic gap and low mastery of English, students use code switching.

Most studies on CS in Algeria describe it as a natural phenomenon among individuals and groups. In most Arab countries, there is evidence of CS with English as one of the language pairs, in a wide variety of sociolinguistic settings as the internet, music, media, advertising, and business, in particular at Universities where English is taught as a foreign language.

This situational code switching occurs when the context and the situation change. For example, a speaker from Tlemcen city uses his Tlemcenian Dialect to talk to a friend at work. He uses TD to talk to his friend speaker however; he uses a combination of French and English to talk about the lecture matters to his student, and a mixture of TD and French to talk about matters concerning daily life items.

The Linguistic Situation of Algeria

The linguistic profile of Algeria is faraway more complex than this, and its truth is so much difficult to pinpoint with its various configurations.

The Algerian language is discussed from a sociolinguistic point of view and Algerian legislation, Arabic is considered the standard as an official language, and French is viewed as the country's first foreign language and second language sociolinguistically speaking, but in reality it is not actually like that. Actually, Arabic is taught at

school as a first language, but it has never been the main communicating language within the Algerian society.

The mother language for Algerians is AA which is used to express oneself on a daily basis. It is a language formed by different languages, which has come about through the coexistence of various civilizations in the North-African lands, like Arabic, Berber, French, Spanish, Turkish, Italian and also, influenced by English through its being as a global language.

The second most commonly spoken language is French, which is used by the majority of the population due to colonization and the parabolic which is very present in Algeria. Another language which is present in Algeria is the Berber language, which is spoken by natives.

Many debates are happening lately in Algeria to establish the Algerian Arabic as a co-official language alongside standard Arabic, but politicians have not approved this yet, as it was analysed by Louafi (2010).

Sociolinguistics and Historical Factors

In addition to the diverse amount of dialects which are spoken in each region and that is difficult to put into numbers: The Algerian spoken in Algiers, Oran, Tlemcen, Annaba, Constantine, and many others.

The linguistic variety in Algeria is very rich and aided throughout history by other foreign languages, due to the coexistence of foreigners with Algerians (wars, long periods of staying put, globalization, etc.).

The presence of foreign languages is equally as important as the presence of French is obvious due to the long-term stay of two civilizations in the Algerian lands for long periods of time.

In the same way, the importance of the English language is relevant due to globalization and its influence in technology, as Mami (2013) explains “By the mid of the year 2000, Algeria has started a series of changes with the aim to improve the structure of the educational system”.

However, the traumatic past events have left the administration confused in certain areas where many schools required better organization and more teachers.

Since the introduction of the English language into schools, it has become an important part of the curriculum and has recorded a great demand in all levels of education. As a result, various Teaching English as a Foreign Language schools have been established throughout

the country such as SIBAWAIH and ECMA (Cherif Moulay Azzoug) schools.

These coexistences create a unique language for the Algerians, who express themselves in different languages and switch from one to another frequently what is commonly known as code switching that constitute the core of the study.

On the other hand, code switching is also defined as a combination of words, phrases and sentences that result from sentence limitations in similar speech context. Based on these definitions, it can be deduced that code switching in general, in Algeria can be regarded as the act of speaking in different languages interchangeably in order to overcome language constraints, to deliver speeches affectively and most importantly as a crucial step towards achieving successful communication

In this study we observe the amount of Code switching which has gone about in classroom conversations, and our study consists in finding out if using this method is intentional or not, beneficial or not.

The Strength of Code Switching

According to Azzoug (2014) code switching helps to improve class participation by inducing a relaxed class atmosphere that allows Algerian young learners to perform much better.

More so, Lee, Jamie Shinhee (2004) in his research affirms that the code switching used by the students outside the classroom should be allowed inside the classroom discussion process because it helps the students contribute in the discussions process and bridges any social and cultural gap.

Code switching helps the speakers to express themselves and present pragmatic meanings (Ouahmiche, 2013). In essence, using code switching in the classroom fosters a positive ambience according to Azzoug (2014).

In other words, the use of code switching in classroom seems beneficial because it helps in explaining abstract concepts and in defining difficult terms to students. This indicates that code switching makes explanations easy to understand for the students by the teachers. It also noticed that CS helps both the students and teachers to bridge the communication gaps in their classroom interactions.

Consequently, at this level, the researcher raises a question if a child is learning through a new language; will this affect attainment at

school? In a possible answers if the learner feels their language, their home culture have been rejected, such learners may feel dislocated, have low self-esteem and lack the academic self-confident. Azzoug (2015) also asserts that in light of all the conflicting findings of studies regarding the role of code switching in the classroom, Algerian teachers, in particular, are confused on whether they should or should not allow their students to code switch in the classroom.

Teachers' Attitude towards the Classroom's Code Switching

An enquiry that arises: why the Algerian teachers and experts in the field are so watchful about not to mix up codes whereas code switching is often considered as subconscious and spontaneous process.

At the English department, there are certain rules regarding classroom language usage and the main rule is that English should be only a language for classroom discourse. The university authority regularly monitors whether the teachers are speaking in English or not.

It is an observable fact that English is strictly maintained as the classroom medium of instruction in the department, though there is no written rule imposed. However, AA and French interference is prohibited, yet, code switching happens occasionally.

So the question is who starts the code switching. obviously the students start it and continue to indicate the reasons for students code switching such as, the English proficiency level, many of them are good at reading and writing but are very weak in speaking as they are not exposed to everyday conversational English. Moreover, the fear and the shame of making mistakes in front of the teachers and the classmates make them feel shaky and they take help of code switching.

The students of the English department usually have negative attitudes towards code switching whereas, students from other departments have no objections. Students prefer to have monolingual classes to enhance their learning and the English language skills and appreciated that the classes should be conducted in English without the interference of AA. Some students believe that code switching is not an effective way to achieve their success in language learning.

The educational level of the students plays an important role to determine effectiveness of code switching as a learning strategy. For

beginners or low-proficiency learners, for instance, code switching is an effective strategy to learn, but, for intermediate level students, more target language input is required therefore, code switching is not approved or liked by their lecturers and students as well (Ling et al., 2014).

In the Algerian context, language practices such as code switching are a controversial issue often condemned by authorities and not accepted by teachers and some experts in the field; code switching has important pedagogical functions

Methodology

The selected participants in this study were 2nd and 3rd years' EFL students from the department of English at Tlemcen University. The group is composed of 54 students. 12 students were males and 42 students were females. These students have been studying English since middle school phase.

The second group of participants includes 10 EFL teachers at the department of English at Tlemcen University from different specialties. They were administered a questionnaire to see their attitudes toward the use of code switching in the classroom.

Algerian Arabic is the participants' native language. The students and teachers use only AA in their daily life compared to English which is used only during the University sessions. On average, they are proficient in both languages to be able to participate in this study.

There are essentially two broad orientations in research: qualitative and quantitative. The quantitative method is used, in this research work, to quantify the problem of code switching in the Algerian EFL classroom presented by the English department at Tlemcen University by generating numerical data or data that is transformed into useable statistics namely attitudes, opinions, behaviors, and other defined variables.

However, qualitative method is primarily exploratory. It is used to gain an understanding of underlying reasons, opinions, and motivations. In fact, it provides insights into the classroom that helps to develop ideas or hypotheses for the research at stake.

For collecting data, two separate sets of questionnaires were designed and distributed among the two distinct groups: English teachers and LMD1 & LMD3 at English department in Tlemcen University.

In the questionnaire designed for the teachers (appendix 2), some questions are included that presuppose some obvious reasons for

teachers' classroom code switching. These questions are included to justify and verify whether or not the assumed reasons are true or not, which received strong support from the teachers. Some questions are designed to evaluate what kind of attitude the teachers possess towards their own and towards the students' code switching. An open ended question is included to find out some more reasons for teachers' code switching which has given an additional value to this research.

The second set of questions (appendix 1) designed for the students, has basically one aim: what is the students' attitude towards their teachers' code switching. The responses collected from the students reveal that though most of the teachers perceive code switching negatively, students consider that code switching is a positive thing and it helps their comprehension of the target language.

Findings and Analysis

Students' Questionnaire

(78%) of the students code switch in their daily conversations. (59%) of the students said that they use code switching in the classroom. (85%) agreed that code switching enhances their communicative skills and (15%) disagreed about that. The majority of learners (83%) said that code switching helps them to develop their language skills and (17%) said that it does not help. (69%) disagree that the use of code switching shows that they are well educated, (31%) of the informants claimed that using code switching shows that they are prestigious and highly ranked, while (67%) disagree on that. (57%) agreed that they code switch due to the lack of English words equivalents, and (43%) disagreed on that. (83%) said that code switching allows them to understand better. (85%) use AA to explain new words easily. (59%) of the whole sample said that CS makes them feel more comfortable and confident in classrooms. The majority of learners learn new words from the teacher while he is switching between English and Arabic/French, whereas (11%) don't learn from the teacher while he is switching. (70%) code switch due to the complexity of some words in English, and (30%) of the participants do not code switch for that reason. (83%) said that the usage of Arabic and French allows them to express the idea that they can't express in English.

Teachers' Questionnaire

(60%) of the teachers at the department of English are qualified as experienced teachers; they have been teaching for more than 10 years. (70%) said that they code switch while teaching in order to help their students understand better, while (30%) disagree on that. (40%) of the

teachers said that code switching help them to bond strongly with their students. The majority of the informants (80%) said that code switching helps them to convey meaning easily to students whereas (20%) disagree on that.(80%) of the teachers said that CS helps the students in learning the second language, (20%) said that it does not help. All the teachers (100%) disagree that they code switch because they feel that students are not exposed to English. The majority of teachers (90%) claimed that using code switching while illustrating new terms helps the students to learn better, while (10%) remain unclear vis-a-vis this question.(60%) of the teachers said that code switch makes the discussion more interesting. All the teachers (100%) agree that CS enhances their communicative skills with the students.(80%) of the teachers agree on that CS enables the students to boost up their second language skills. All the teachers (100%) said that CS makes the students feel more comfortable and confident while learning.

Results and Discussion

Overall, the students confirmed that code-switching was used widely to perform language functions. 83% of the respondents indicated that code switching was used when the teachers were checking for understanding. A total of 80 percent of the respondents indicated that the teachers code switch when explaining difficult concepts. Besides that, a total of 72 percent of the respondents acknowledged that code switching was used when the teachers were explaining the meaning of new words. More than 70 percent of the respondents also acknowledged that code-switching is used when the teachers were elaborating on matters pertaining to the classroom management.

In addition, 60 percent of the respondents indicated that code-switching was used when the teachers provided explanations on different contexts. The function for which code-switching was least used was when the teachers were giving instructions to complete tasks. It can be seen that code-switching was used by the teachers to perform various classroom functions. These results are similar to the various classroom or pedagogical functions in which code-switching can be best used as discovered by other researchers (Schweers, 1999; Burden, 2001; Tang, 2002).

In short, the teachers' code-switching is important in providing a psychologically conducive learning environment for the learners (Lai, 1996; Schweers, 1999), providing a strong foundation to learners' affective satisfaction.

Generally, the respondents perceived that code-switching has helped to ensure that they achieve their intended success due to a high percentage of respondents who were undecided in their choice. The respondents were most united when indicating that code-switching has helped them understand difficult concepts faced in their learning. Of a total of 54 respondents, 83 percent of the respondents indicated that code-switching has helped them understand new words, the respondents perceived that code-switching has assisted them in understanding any difficult concepts contained in the lesson while nearly Sixty-nine percent (68 %) of the respondents also perceived that the teachers' code-switching has helped them understand the grammar being taught. Some 67 percent of the respondents acknowledged that their teachers' code-switching has assisted them in learning English in the classrooms.

Conclusion

The major concern in this research is to explain the influence of code switching on the comprehension and the lexical acquisition of EFL learners. To reach this end, two research questions have been drawn to be answered. The first one was to know if the use of code switching in the classroom enhances or inhibits the learning of English. The second tries to find if code switching can be used as a strategy to ameliorate learning. Therefore, two hypotheses have been formed. As predicted, the actual use of code switching enhances the learning of English; and it utilized as a strategy to improve the process of language learning. The analysis of the results have shown that the teachers code switch while teaching because code switching creates a relaxed atmosphere in the classroom and it makes the students understand better. As a result, code switching if used as a teaching strategy will significantly improves language learning. It would be of a great interest to make further research about code switching and language learning, and the attitudes toward its use during the class.

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Appendix 1

Students' Questionnaire

The aim of this questionnaire is to examine your attitudes and beliefs towards the use of Code-Switching (i.e. the use Arabic/French words in the English classroom conversations) at University settings. We will be grateful if you respond to all the following questions honestly as your answers will be helpful to better understand your attitudes.

Part 1: Personal Information

1 Gender:

☐ Male. ☐ Female.

Part 2: Usage of Code-Switching

2. Do you use Code-Switching in your conversation?

☐ Yes ☐ No

4. Do you use Code-Switching in your chatting on social networks (Facebook, Twitter, Google+, etc)?

☐ Yes. ☐ No.

5. Do you use Code-Switching in classroom?

☐ Yes. ☐ No.

Part 3: Attitudes towards the use of Code-Switching

Code-Switching enhances my communication skills.

☐ Agree ☐ Disagree.

Code-switching helps me to develop my language skills.

☐ Agree ☐ Disagree

Using Code switching shows that I'm well-educated.

☐ Agree ☐ Disagree

Using Code switching shows that I'm prestigious.

☐ Agree ☐ Disagree

I Code-switch due to the lack of English words equivalents.

☐ Agree ☐ Disagree

Code-switching allows me to understand better.

☐ Agree ☐ Disagree

Code-switching helps me to convey new words easily.

☐ Agree ☐ Disagree

Code –switching makes me feel more comfortable and confident in classrooms.

☐ Agree ☐ Disagree

Code-switching helps me in learning new words from the teachers while they are switching between English and Arabic/French

☐ Agree ☐ Disagree

I Code-switch with my classmates due to the complexity of some words in English

☐ Agree ☐ Disagree

Usage of Arabic/French allows me to express the ideas that I can't express in English.

☐ Agree ☐ Disagree

Appendix 2

Teachers' Questionnaire

The aim of this questionnaire is to examine your attitudes and beliefs towards the use of Code-Switching (i.e. the use Arabic/French words in the English classroom conversations) at University settings. We will be grateful if you respond to all the following questions honestly as your answers will be helpful to better understand your attitudes

Part 1: Personal Information

Gender:

☐ Male. ☐ Female.

Qualification:

☐ Magister. ☐ Master + (1,2,3...) ☐ Doctorate.

Experience in Teaching:

☐ Less than 5 years. ☐ Between 5 to 10 years.

☐ More than 10 years.

Part2: Attitudes towards the use of Code-Switching

I Code-switch while teaching in order to help my students understand better.

☐ Agree ☐ Disagree

I Code-switch due to lack of equivalents in English language

☐ Agree ☐ Disagree

Code-switching helps me to bond strongly with my students.

☐ Agree ☐ Disagree

Code-switching helps me to convey meaning easily to students.

☐ Agree ☐ Disagree

Usage of Code switching helps the students in learning the second language.

☐ Agree ☐ Disagree

I Code-switch due to the complexity of certain words in English

☐ Agree ☐ Disagree

I Code switch because I feel that the students are not exposed to English.

☐ Agree ☐ Disagree

Using Code-switching while illustrating new terms helps the studentstolearn better.

☐ Agree ☐ Disagree

Code-switching makes the discussions more interesting.

☐ Agree ☐ Disagree

Code switching enhances my communication skills with the students.

☐ Agree ☐ Disagree

Code-switching enables the students to boost up their second languages kills.

☐ Agree ☐ Disagree

Code-switching makes the students feel more comfortable and confident while learning.

☐ Agree ☐ Disagree