Code Switching in the Malaysian ESL Classroom

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Abstract

Though there is no absolute consensus that bans code switching while teaching English in Malaysia, there is a general view that the use of English should be maximised within the English language classroom to enable students to master the language effectively (Lee, 2010). This paper reviews literature on both positive and negative aspects of code switching in the ESL classroom and goes further to discuss the implications code switching has towards English language teaching and learning in the ESL classroom in Malaysia. Literature suggests that English language teachers in Malaysia do have a positive attitude towards code switching and use it to explain vocabulary and grammar as they find it facilitates students' understanding of the lesson as well as saving time on explanations which minimises interruptions, allowing the lesson to proceed more quickly. It also allows students to learn in a comfortable, relaxed and secure environment which enhances their ability to learn the target language and improves their understanding of the lesson. However, code switching should be cautiously applied in order not to jeopardise target language acquisition. Results from the study would allow practicing teachers, teacher trainers and teacher trainees to make well informed decisions when deciding to participate in code switching in their language classrooms.

Keywords: Code Switching, TESL, English Language Teaching, Language Learning, Language Education.

Code Switching in the Malaysian ESL Classroom

The debate of allowing code switching in the English language classroom has long been a topic of contention for the last three decades. Early research by Gumperz (1982) defines it as the use of more than one language or code within a speech event while Eldridge (1996, p.303) briefly defines it as 'the alternation between two (or more) languages'. More recent research defines code switching 'as the use of two or more linguistic varieties in the same conversation inclusive of dialect changes and style changes' (Cheng, 2003, p.59).

Another definition of code switching derived by Don (2003, p.24) is the 'use of more than one code in the course of a single discourse in a multilingual setting'. Balakrishnan (2011, p.9) summaries in her studies that code switching can be considered as an 'act of switching between two languages within a single discourse.' Sridhar (2005) states that when two or more languages are present within a community, its speakers have the tendency to code switch. Code switching also conveys both social and linguistic meanings. According to Cheng (2003, p.61), a speaker who code switches 'is seen to manipulate or to create a desired meaning through code switching' where in this case is to ensure learners understand the lesson being taught by the teacher. McKay & Bokhorst-Heng (2008, p.165) summarises it best by defining code switching as 'the alternation of linguistic codes in the same conversation undertaken by proficient bilinguals'.

Traditionally, the phenomenon of code switching is considered as a random process caused by language interference, laziness and poor mastery of the target language. However, various studies show that this phenomenon does not happen at random but follows certain

linguistic rules that allow its speakers to communicate and attain mutual understanding which is the main aim of the phenomenon (Sridhar, 2005; Kirkpatrick, 2007; Dong & Zhang, 2009; Katz at el, 2009; Gulzar, 2010). This claim is further supported by Heredia & Altarriba (2001) who reports that code switching follows certain functional and grammatical principles and is a complex, rule-governed phenomenon. There are perfectly good explanations as to when and why people participate in code switching. One reason is due to the speaker's lack of vocabulary or proficiency in the target language. Cheng (2003) explains that when a speaker lacks specific vocabularies in English, they would code switch as a strategy to compensate the deficiency so that the meaning is carried across effectively.

Multilingual speakers often use terms from their mother tongue or L1 because they do not know the appropriate words in the second language (Holmes, 2013). This is different from code mixing, lexical borrowing and translanguaging as they are each distinctively different form one another. Code mixing is defined as the combination of words of two or more languages while reducing the linguistic forms and use of a language (García, 2009). This is also different from lexical borrowing which happens due to lack of vocabulary in English to express a concept or object as there are no exact equivalents in the English vocabulary and their meaning cannot be fully carried over into English (Holmes, 2013). According to García (2009, p.45), translanguaging refers to 'multiply discursive practices which bilinguals engage in order to make sense of their bilingual worlds'. This means that bilingual speakers use different languages for different needs and context in order to construct meaning. However, for the purpose of this dissertation, the main focus would be on code switching.

Code switching can be divided into two types, 'intrasentential' and 'intersentential'. Intrasentential refers 'to instances in which the switch occurs within the boundaries of a clause or a sentence' (García, 2009, p.49) while intersentential occurs 'when the switching occurs at clause or sentence boundaries' (García, 2009, p.50). Don's research (2003) also mentions the social meaning of code switching and how switching from one code to another is consistent both linguistically and sociolinguistically. Wardhaugh & Fuller (2015) describes these kinds of code switching as 'situational code switching' and 'metaphorical code switching'. 'Situational code switching' is viewed as a social strategy that is used to magnify or minimise social distance between each other to show intimacy or estrangement (Dong & Zhang, 2009, Holmes, 2013) while 'metaphorical code switching' takes place when changes occur within a speech event like when a new member is added to the conversation (Holmes, 2013; Wardhaugh & Fuller, 2015). Speakers use this kind of code switching in order to express certain purposes such as to show solidarity. It occurs when speakers use it to express convergence or divergence when building conversational relationships and to avoid topics, to decline, or to display affections (Dong & Zhang, 2009; Deckert & Vickers, 2011; Holmes, 2013; Wardhaugh & Fuller, 2015).

Wardhaugh & Fuller (2015) mentions how age also plays a role in code switching among multilingual speakers. Age plays a significant role in a lot of societies, especially in the Asian community which Malaysia is a part of. Hence, to show respect while trying to close the gap between social distances is also one of the reasons why multilingual code switch to a language that is understood by both speakers and address each other at a level that is both acceptable and respectable.

Based on the definitions mentioned by multiple scholars above, the definition for code switching for the purposes of this dissertation will be summarised as the switching of multiple languages within a communicative discourse.

Negative aspects on the use of code switching

In second language acquisition, code switching is viewed as an error and an indication of a lack of competence in the target language (Rampton, 1995 cited in McKay & Bokhorst-Heng, 2008). This notion has led to the banning of code switching in the language classrooms for some time. Multiple researches supported this notion of not allowing the L1 to be utilised throughout the whole lesson. They have been critical of the idea that code switching would cause second language learners to acquire deficient forms of the target language and therefore should not be encouraged (Corson, 2001). Many second language instructors have therefore tried to minimise the use of the learners' L1 and discourage the use of code switching amongst learners but this may have reduced the optimal effectiveness and quality of learning a second language (Flyman-Mattsson & Burenhult, 1999). However, the concerns by these researchers are justifiable as they are apprehensive about the quality of the target language acquired if code switching is continuously allowed in the classroom as it may hinder learners from accurately mastering a second language which is the main goal of the learning process.

It is important to note that most of the negative aspects of code switching are presented by second language researchers who are mostly from monolingual backgrounds (Weschler, 1997, García, 2009). In this case, code switching happens in the classroom between learners even though the second language instructor may not understand the language that learners are using

and this is dangerous because the teacher would not be able to determine if the relayed information or discussion between the learners are right or wrong. Therefore, many of these instructors believe that second language learners should learn the target language the way learners acquire their L1 and how monolinguals acquire their L1 like many teaching methods have suggested (Brown, 2007). As monolinguals did not have another language to rely on when learning the L1, second language learners also should not be allowed to use another language to bridge the gap when learning a new language. Thus code switching should be withheld altogether so learners could master the target language and achieve the same level of language competence as monolinguals (Nunan, 1989).

Most second language acquisition methods involving the teaching and learning of English have insisted in the 'English only' method for a long time. Code switching is a strategy used by language learners for language learning and second language instructors believe that thinking in the L1 would inhibit learners from thinking directly in the target language (Auerbach, 1995). They believe that as code switching involves translation from the L1 to the target language, it may encourage literal translation where learners attempt to translate word for word from their L1 to the target language to communicate meaning (Cheng, 2003). This believe was demonstrated in a study conducted by Cheng (2003) where it was found to be a strategy employed by both Malay and Chinese respondents within the study as both Malay and Chinese structures were found to be used to answer questions in English. This phenomenon is known as interference which is the occasional misapplication of L1 rules to the L2 (Weschler, 1997). This study further substantiated the claim that by allowing code switching in the second language

classroom, translation from the L1 to the L2 would cause interference and this might impede the language development of the learners' attempt to master the target language.

Code switching may also cause fossilisation of interlanguage and deter the main aim of second language acquisition which is to master the target language (Selinker, 1992). This raised another cause for concern by second language instructors. Sert (2005) cautioned that permitting code switching may be positive for the short term by providing mutual understanding but it may lead to fossilisation of a deficient form of the target language in the long run. An example by Weschler (1997) from Japanese learners supports this notion through the existence of 'Japlish' which is a hybrid form of English which includes frequent code switching between English and Japanese. As it was understandable among its mutual speakers, 'Japlish' has managed to take root and become an acceptable form of English spoken in Japan. Like 'Japlish', 'Rojak English' or more fondly known as 'Manglish', also involves frequent code switching between English and Bahasa Malaysia, and has come to be accepted in Malaysia (Rajandran, 2011). Although these basilectal varieties of English are not used in formal and international functions, nevertheless, code switching is attributed as one of the factors that caused the fossilisation of these inaccurate forms of English by its learners which ultimately led to the acceptance of these basilectal forms of English within its community.

Besides interference of the L1 in the L2 acquisition, code switching is also seen as a 'crutch' for second language learning that should be removed as early as possible (Weschler, 1997). As code switching allows the L1 to be present during the teaching and learning of the target language, students would have a tendency to rely on it during their lesson and that prevents learners from fully immersing themselves in the target language. The belief is that in

order to learn the target language better, students need to come in contact with it more. One of the many methods used is to provide learners with multiple L2 samples and make them practise these samples in the target language so as to maximise the usefulness of the L2 samples by totally avoiding the use of the L1 in order for learners to be fluent in the target language (Littlewood, 1981). Learners need to learn to operate in the target language as they may not have the opportunity to practise outside of the classroom. Therefore second language instructors believe that by allowing only the target language to be present within the classroom, learners would be able to better acquire and master the target language.

The research above describes the negative aspects of code switching in second language acquisition and as many instructors believe the claim that it is detrimental to second language acquisition, banning the L1 within the second language classroom would seem to be the most appropriate approach to overcome these problems.

Positive aspects on the use code switching

Until today, there has not been any mutual agreement from scholars of both divides on allowing code switching in the language classroom but more recently, there has been research supporting this notion (Eldridge, 1996; Lee, 2010; Harahap, 2016). These researchers believe that code switching facilitates learners to achieve better communicative competence of the second language and should be encouraged for the betterment of the future of language teaching and learning.

Code switching is used in the classroom as a strategy which bilinguals employ to communicate more effectively (García, 2009). In a bilingual and multilingual context, learners

acquiring a second language need to have the same L1 before they can understand each other through code switching using their L1 and the target language. The ability to communicate with each other through code switching suggests that learners are positive towards it as they see it as a way to communicate more effectively. This is substantiated by Sampson (2012) who believed that banning the L1 would hinder communication and learning. Furthermore, Huerta-Macias & Quintero (1992, p.86) found that, 'code switching serves to not only enhance communication in the teaching/learning process but can also help to maintain and develop the languages of a bilingual'. This is because learners who are weak are not proficient in the second language and hence they would resort to code switching during interactions in the classroom in order to communicate effectively. Pollard's (2002) comparative study on code switching in an immersion setting to a bilingual setting further suggests that code switching in a bilingual classroom allows students to better convey their ideas to their peers and the teacher. Students in the bilingual setting find it a valuable strategy to communicate their thoughts and carry out discussions without language barriers as compared to the immersion settings where students find the language barrier difficult to communicate their ideas and knowledge to each other. This further supports the case that code switching helps second language learners to communicate more effectively while incorporating the target language into their language learning acquisition.

Research such as Nguyen, Grainger & Carey (2016) suggests that allowing learners to switch between learners' L1 and the target language not only facilitates their language learning development but also builds up their confidence in using the target language. This is supported by Eldridge (1996) who said that the removal of code switching may increase learners' language acquisition but can damage their confidence and motivation in learning the language which could

impede their language development. Heredia & Altarriba (2001) find that one of the strengths of code switching is that it increases language use and word frequency. Learners are not afraid to make mistakes and this encourages them to use the target language more often, thus giving them more practice in the target language which eventually leads to their decrease in relying on the L1 while gaining confidence in using the target language. Comparatively when learners learning a second language are discouraged by the language barrier without the avenue of a coping strategy like code switching which can help them communicate their ideas across to others, they will not just lose confidence in themselves but the motivation to learn the target language. This may result in their reluctance to participate in classroom discussions and the appearance that they are uninterested or detached from the lesson when the real reason is their lack of language proficiency which makes them unable to accurately convey their ideas to their peers and teachers.

Code switching is also found to facilitate language teaching. Tien & Liu (2006) in Taiwan claim that code switching is unavoidable in classrooms where learners are not very proficient in the target language. They find that within a multilingual setting like Taiwan where Mandarin and other regional dialects are more prominently used in society, learners do not actively communicate in English after school hours as they see it as having no practical functional value outside the classroom. Therefore, teachers and learners alike have no choice but to rely on code switching within the classroom during the teaching and learning of the target language in order to facilitate the transfer of knowledge despite the language barrier. It not only simplifies the explanations of grammar and vocabulary during classroom activities but it also ensures that lessons can continue to be conducted without constant interruptions due to

explanations and clarifications. This example also supports the suggestion by Cook (2001) who says that permitting the use of learners' L1 would generate discussions among learners which will lead to learners' better understanding of the task required of them. The use of L1 to explain activities is beneficial to the learners as they would be able to participate in the activities and understand what is required of them instantly without the teacher having to explain the activity multiple times in the target language with the probability that learners may not understand at all. Thus, allowing the use of learners' L1 through code switching not only engages learners to the target language but it also helps in language teaching of the second language.

McKay & Bokhorst-Heng (2008) mentions that as more and more speakers of English are bilingual with many of them code switching at a regular basis, teachers today need to re-examine their attitude towards code switching to minimise the negative attitude toward it. Teachers should start to find ways to incorporate code switching into the classroom and utilise it as positive resource for language teaching.

Code switching in Malaysia

Malaysians had been bilinguals since the different ethnic communities started interacting with each other for commerce, government and social purposes (Watson, 2011). The need for a common language for interaction between communities while maintaining the mother tongue of different communities has helped shape the language climate of Malaysia today. The multilingual environment encourages the development of code switching and code mixing among Malaysians as it has become a part of national identity while promoting solidarity among Malaysians.

The ability to code switch can be considered as part of national pride that starts young and this notion is supported with evidence from a study conducted by Cheng (2003) with Malaysian pre-school children. He founds that these children code switch to communicate with each other as well as with adults without being taught. It was concluded that the children have most probably acquired the ability to code switch from their parents and teachers through natural observation. Cook (1999) also gave examples of overhearing teachers code switching between English and Bahasa Malaysia while chatting with each other in the staff room. These examples further indicate that code switching is integrated into Malaysian society and has even infiltrated the education sector.

Malaysia is considered to be in the Outer Circle where English is widely spoken as a second language according to Kachru's 'three circle modal' (1985 cited in Kirkpatrick 2007). This suggests that English is widely used in society where a native variety of Malaysia English exists and has its own spoken norms but tend to rely on British English, an exonormative modal during formal contexts, especially for written English (Mesthrie & Bhatt, 2008). As a former British colony, English was introduced to the local society as a language of power and governance and is still viewed in present day Malaysian society as a language for professionals, government and business (David, 2000). This led to the interactions of English with the local languages and cultures in Malaysia which played a major role in influencing the development of the local Malaysian English variety which has fondly came to be known as 'Rojak English' (Kirkpatrick, 2007) or 'Manglish'.

'Manglish' is considered a low level or basilectal form of Malaysian English (Rajandran, 2011). It is a result of constant code switching and code mixing among the local languages and

dialects which is unique as it contains a mixture of multiple mother tongue languages including Bahasa Malaysia, Mandarin, Tamil and various dialects from diverse ethnic communities like Hokkien, Cantonese, Malayalam and Hindi, to name a few, with English. Competent English speakers might code mix and code switch less but would utilise lexical borrowing while others who are not proficient in English might code switch and code mix more in order to get their meaning across. Nonetheless, 'Manglish' is widely used by Malaysians young and old, both proficient or not proficient in English, to communicate daily with each other in informal settings like ordering food in hawker centres or shopping in fresh food markets as the ability to use 'Manglish' not only decreases social distance but represents a form of solidarity among fellow Malaysians regardless of ethnic backgrounds as it is a perceived form of national identity (Foo & Richards, 2004).

The maintenance of the language diversity found in Malaysia was never considered a problem as it is seen as a legal constitutional right that is enshrined in the Constitution of Malaysia where all citizens have the right to learn their mother tongue even though Bahasa Malaysia is held as the national language (David & Govindasamy, 2005, Wee, 2010). These languages are maintained through bilingual education policies where both Bahasa Malaysia and English are taught in all schools as compulsory subjects since primary school nationwide. Besides providing job opportunities, local teachers are absorbed into the education system. As these local teachers are proficient users of code switching themselves, code switching is naturally brought into the classrooms.

Code switching in the English language classroom in Malaysia

In a multicultural society like Malaysia, code switching is normal and natural (Kirkpatrick, 2007). As local teachers are bilingual and participates in code switching themselves are absorbed into the public education system, it is not surprising that code switching is carried into the realm of education. In teacher colleges and universities across Malaysia, teacher trainees were taught not to code switch in class to maximise students' exposure to English during classroom learning. However, many of them find it hard to abide by the rule when they enter into service as they find a lot of scaffolding is needed by their students when learning the target language and find that in order to make get their lessons across better, code switching does occasionally help (Then & Ting, 2009). This has led to it being a common feature in English language classrooms in Malaysia.

Many English language teachers in Malaysia feel that code switching helps learners understand and learn English better and this notion is supported by Lee (2010). His study was based on English language teachers in Labuan, a federal territory off the coast of East Malaysia, who 'indicated that code switching is necessary when the situation requires the use of mother tongue or the L1 in the classroom' (Lee, 2010, p.38). The teachers believe that as code switching helps low proficiency learners acquire English, it should be maximised as much as possible. Then & Ting (2009, p.12) further explains that 'in circumstances where students' proficiency in the instructional language is lacking, code switching is a necessary tool for teachers to make their messages more comprehensible to students'. Teachers find it useful as it facilitates learners' understanding of the lesson while students find it a useful learning strategy that facilitates their acquisition of English as a second language. These researches concluded that teachers code

switch for multiple functions in the classroom and the reasons are mainly aimed at increasing learners' affective support and learning development.

Permitting code switching within the classroom also helps learners respond better to acquire the target language. A study by Badrul Hisham & Kamaruzaman (2009) on Malaysian students show that students with low proficiency in the English language react positively and fully support teachers' code switching in class. Learners in the study indicated that code switching allowed them to enjoy their classes and felt that they learned more as they understood the lessons better when the teacher code switches in class. This notion is also substantiated by a study conducted by Then & Ting (2009) in a secondary school in Kuching, the capital of the state of Sarawak in Malaysia, where learners are observed to respond better with code switching within the English language classroom. Learners are able to negotiate meaning and give appropriate responds to the teachers' instructions and questions which not only save time but also allows the lesson to progress well. These researches proved to show that learners do respond better to the target language through code switching.

Code switching plays multiple roles for learners from bilingual and multilingual situations. According to studies conducted by Eldridge (1996) in a Turkish secondary school and Tien & Liu (2006) in a school in Taiwan where many of its students are bilingual, both studies found that many of the switches in language by both learners and teachers alike are multifunctional and are open to functional interpretations. The main five functions are floor holding, reiteration, maintaining solidarity, equivalent comprehension and instructional procedures. Conversely, the research done by Then & Ting (2011) in the Malaysian context found that the primary reasons why teachers code switch are reiteration and quotation. This is

because the change of language helps capture students' attention which in turn allows the planned structure of the lesson to be maintained. Code switching not only reduces the time spent on negotiating meaning but allows the teacher to spend the time saved to concentrate on teaching the syllabus which teachers struggle to complete within a year.

In a multilingual society like Malaysia, code switching can be seen as a tool to facilitate language teaching and learning and should be given due recognition for its effectiveness. Nevertheless, teachers need to use this device with discretion. Taking what was cautioned by Sert (2005) in mind and depending on the context of their classroom, allowing code switching in the Malaysian English language classroom by the teacher should be viewed with the learners' interest at heart.

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