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# ESL Learners' reactions towards code switching in classroom settings

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**Abstract**

The use of more than one code of language among the Malaysian English language instructors and ESL learners in the context of formal classroom settings is widely acknowledged (Then & Ting, 2009). Many factors contribute to the occurrence of code-switching or in other words, there must have been certain communication purposes associated which cause code switching to occur. This study aims to uncover the attitudes of ESL learners towards the functions of code-switching employed by English language instructors at tertiary level. It addresses two research questions: (1) What do ESL learners think about code switching in the English classroom? (2) When does code switching best function in the English classroom for the ESL learners? Forty-five diploma students were randomly selected as the respondents for this study. A survey questionnaire which focused on the students' attitudes, usage and opinion towards code switching in the classroom was utilised in the study. It was found that most of the ESL learners have positive attitudes towards code switching. The ESL learners were also reported to believe that code switching facilitates them in understanding the target language. The findings suggest that the use of code switching is necessary when the situation requires the use of first language in the classroom to enable the learners to become more confident in mastering English.

## 1. Introduction

Most of the world population in the era of globalization and technology advancement today is bilingual rather than monolingual. The number of multilingual speakers is also increasing rapidly. The number of languages one

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speaks plays an imminent role in determining the rate of success one might achieve (Ahmad and Jusoff, 2009). Therefore, in many education centres and higher-learning institutions, students are equipped with knowledge on either second or foreign languages. In most cases, in countries such as Nigeria, Oman, Tanzania, Bangladesh and Malaysia, English is a compulsory subject in either primary, secondary or tertiary education (Fasanmi, 2011; Al-Husseini, 2006; Foo & Richard, 2004; Ministry of Education, 2011).

With much focus placed on the importance of mastering the English language, language educators such as teachers and lecturers are burdened with the responsibility of educating and coaching the learners to achieve near native-like qualities of a language user. This is not an easy task, especially when one is dealing with two languages that do not share the same culture and do not apply similar grammatical and phonological properties. Most often, beginner and intermediate level learners find it almost impossible to understand phrases and vocabulary in their course of learning. Educators, on the other hand, are trying as hard as possible to make these encounters easier for the learners by simplifying them to the learners. However, there are times that the educators have to accept code-switching as the better option – and this decision always comes with a price.

Many early scholars (Prucha, 1983; Ellis, 1984; Wong-Fillmore, 1985; Chaudron, 1988) proposed that code-switching should not be allowed in second language classrooms as it may hinder learning process. This is based on the argument that learners may depend too much on teachers' code-switching. They may lose their eagerness to learn and the ability to guess and infer in new linguistic environments of the second language. Secondly, it might cause confusion and fossilization and internalization of errors in learners. Frequent use of code-switching might influence the way learners communicate in the second language later (Bhatt, 1997; Martin, 1999; Zhu, 2008).

However, looking at it from a practical point of view, many language educators such as Crystal (1987), Cook (1991), Burenhult and Flyman-Mattsson (1999), Levine (2003) and Sert (2005) agree that there are times when explaining in the first language is easier. Evidently, this saves time and helps minimize confusion among learners. Learners found this as a motivating factor in learning the second language as they do not perceive the language as difficult to learn (Levine, 2003; Greggio & Gil, 2007).

Despite the benefits and disadvantages of teachers' code-switching in second language classrooms, careful planning and consideration need to be taken into account before language educators can decide on the possibility of applying code-switching in classrooms. Earlier studies such as (Ustenel, 2004; Yang, 2004 (as cited in Then & Ting, 2009)); Greggio & Gil, 2007; Then & Ting, 2009; and Lee, 2010) have investigated the issues of teachers' code-switching and its linguistic implication. Lee (2010) has looked at 44 English language teachers' (in the district of Sandakan, Malaysia) attitude towards code switching and the functions it serves. Other researchers (Butzkamm, 1998; Zabrodskaja, 2007; Martin, 1999; Mwinsheikhe, 2003; and Probyn, 2005 (as cited in Then & Ting 2009)) have also studied extensively on why learners code-switch. However, not many studies have been done on the students' point of view towards teachers' code-switching. Therefore the current study seeks to bridge this gap.

## 2. Theoretical background

Investigating a scenario in a second language setting will almost always pull us back towards the question on "How does a child acquire a language?" or what is termed as Language Acquisition. As this paper looks at code-switching, the two most popular language acquisition theories are Chomsky's innate-universal structure (1972, 1975, 1979) and Skinners' Behaviorist (1957) theories. According to Chomsky, each human being is born with underlying universal language structure. As they grow, they are exposed to cultural elements of the society they are in. These cultural elements help them define the universal language structure as to what is acceptable or appropriate to be produced in the context of that language. It is important to note here that, these cultural elements have been prescribed to the learners through affirmation and rejection of other language users (James, 1990; Skiba, 1997).

The Behaviorist theory on the other hand, believes that man learns language through a series of reinforcement. They suggest that an individual tends to keep certain structure and reject the rest due to the positive and negative feedback received from the caretaker or other adult(s) during the growing period (James,

1990). Both of these theories are grounded on the fact that they "rely on exposure to appropriate samples of the language" (Skiba, 1997). The same is evident in second language learning. According to Skiba (1997) even though code-switching may cause discomfort to the listeners, "it does provide an opportunity for language development".

Code-switching becomes eminent in Malaysian context as most of Malaysians are at least bilingual if not multilingual (Gaudart, 2002). This is so as a result of The National Education Policy which states that Malay and English are to be taught at all schools (Lee, 2010). For the Chinese, Indians and other ethnic minorities, they usually have an extra language in their depository. With this scenario, Asmah (2004) concluded that code-switching is part of Malaysia's sociolinguistic profile.

Having such profile listed on Malaysian teachers' resume, it is undeniable that some teachers code switch in class as code switching can be "automatic and unconscious" (Sert, 2005). This theory is accepted by many other researchers, among others Mattsson & Burenhult (1999), Zabrodskaja (2007), ((Tikunoff (1985), Ovando & Collier (1985) as cited in Zabrodskaja (2007)).

As for the conclusion, since some Malaysian teachers code switch in their classroom interaction (Then & Ting, 2009; Lee, 2010), and some scholars (Crystal, 1987; Cook, 1991; Burenhult & Flyman-Mattsson, 1999; Levine, 2003; and Sert, 2005) view its usage positively, as well as the fact that the learners learn second language based on appropriate input presented to them (Skiba, 1997), it is important for the students' perception on teachers' code switching to be studied. Thus, this is the gap that this study tries to fill in.

### 2.1. Literature review

In 1982, Gumperz defined code switching as "the juxtaposition within the same speech exchange of passages of speech belonging to two different grammatical systems or subsystems" (Gumperz, (1982:59). Later, Rodman and Fromkin (1998) defined code switching as "the insertion of a word or phrase of a language other than that being spoken into a single sentence, or the movement back and forth between two languages or dialects" (Rodman & Fromkin, 1998: 522). In addition to Rodman and Fromkin's definition, Cook (2000) has added the interlocutors in his definition - "going from one language to the other in mid speech when both speakers know the same two languages" (Cook, 2000:83).

It is interesting to note that most of code-switching take place automatically and unconsciously (Skiba, 1997; Sert, 2005; Jingxia, 2010). Code-switching also happens between bilingual or multilingual speakers to create linguistic solidarity especially between those who share the same ethno-cultural identity (Skiba, 1997; Sert, 2005). This supports Trudgill's definition on code switching which is, "speakers switch to manipulate or influence or define the situation as they wish, and to convey nuances of meaning and personal intention" (Trudgill, 2000:105).

In discussing the role played by code-switching in ESL classrooms, Jacobson (1983) listed four rationales of code-switching in second language classroom. He elaborated that, code-switching is necessary as: [1] it provides students with sufficient input in the two languages for them to derive grammatical and lexical information, [2] it enables students with differing relative language proficiencies to focus on learning the concepts being presented during content area instruction, [3] it provides a way of establishing equal prestige for both languages within the classroom setting, and then is likely to encourage a balanced distribution of the two languages, [4] it encourages the kind of language behaviour commonly used among bilinguals who are proficient in both languages and [5] it keeps the students on task and thus contributes to the accumulation of academic learning time (Jacobson, 1983).

This is further reflected in a study conducted by Martin (1999). She proposes that there are seven reasons why language educators code-switch in language classrooms: [1] to signal the transition between preparing for a lesson and the start of the lesson, [2] to specify a particular addressee, [3] to distinguish 'doing a lesson' from 'talking about the lesson', [4] to change footing or make an aside, [5] to distinguish questions from a written text from talking about them, [6] to bring out the voices of different characters in a narrative and [7] to distinguish classroom management utterances from talks related to the lesson content.

It was further emphasized by Ahmad and Jusoff (2009) that code-switching serves as a mean to provide student with opportunities to communicate and enhance students understanding. Besides facilitating classroom instruction, it also promotes effective transfer of information and skills (Ahmad and Jusoff, 2009) which lead to a

better understanding of learning among learners as it provides learners with sufficient input to understand the L2 (Jacobson, 1983).

In the same vein, Cook (2000) argued that allowing L1 in L2 classrooms is a humanistic approach towards the learners. Through this approach, the learners' opportunity to speak their mind is not deprived by the deficiency of not knowing the right vocabulary and the fear of making mistakes. Cook further argues that rather than looking at code-switching as a barrier, teachers should look at it as a means to facilitate and ease the learning process. He suggested that learners would best benefit from teachers' code-switching in several contexts, namely, when explaining grammar, organizing tasks, disciplining students and implementing test (Jingxia, 2010).

In the study conducted by Greggio and Gill (2007), it is evident that the teachers code switch in the beginner group in four different occasions such as [1] explaining grammar, [2] giving instructions, [3] monitoring/assisting the students [4] when correcting activities and interestingly to attract learners' attention. In most cases, the teachers claimed that they need to code switch in order to "clarify words, expressions, structures and rules of utterances" (Greggio and Gil, 2007:376). Thus from the above functions, code-switching does play an important role in ESL classrooms as it helps learners to better understand the target language they are learning. In advert to the positive views held on code-switching in ESL classrooms, some researchers (Prucha, 1983; Ellis, 1984; Wong-Fillmore, 1985; Chaudron, 1988), mostly those who subscribed to Direct Method and the Audio-Lingual Method of teaching L2, argue that learners do not have to understand everything uttered in ESL classroom, as code-switching has a negative effect on the learning process (Brown, 2007). In their argument, code-switching does not promote inquisitive quality in learners thus learners will not be able to learn the language outside the classroom (Chambers, 1991; Halliwell & Jones, 1991 and Macdonald, 1993 as cited in Jingxia, 2010).

In addition to the above, the overuse of the L1 might affect the quantity and quality of L2 input. As a result of this, the classroom learning time is not fully optimized by the teachers thus the students do not learn as much as they possibly can if compared to when the teachers speak fully in the target language (Jingxia, 2010).It is also feared that the use of code-switching in classroom instruction might lead to internalization of non-standard L2 form and fossilization of errors (Wong-Fillamore, 1985). The students might accept it as a standard form of the language they are learning and therefore stick to it without realizing that they have committed the errors (Jingxia, 2010). Thus, code-switching in second language classrooms can only be applied with due consideration from the teachers.

Despite the various useful findings on code-switching in ESL classroom from different backgrounds, more can be learned about learners' perception towards code switching. With this in mind, this study aims to investigate the ESL learners' reactions towards code switching in English classroom and to identify its best function for ESL learners.

## 3. Research design

### 3.1. Research questions

This research seeks to answer the following questions:

- What do ESL learners think about code switching in the English classroom?
- When does code switching serve its best functions in the English classroom for the ESL learners?
- To what extend learners' preference of teachers' code-switching in explaining differences between first and second language correlate with learners' preference of teachers' code-switching in helping learners feel more confident and comfortable?

### 3.2. Significance and limitation of the study

This study helps map out learners' view on the effective usage of code-switching in certain teachers' classroom practice. Thus, it provides insights which might affect teachers' decision on code-switching. As the current study focuses on second semester diploma in Applied Sciences students of Universiti Teknologi MARA

Pahang, the findings cannot be generalized to other ESL learners especially those of different academic and demographic background.

## 3.3. Research methodology

A total of forty-five second semester diploma students from the Faculty of Applied Sciences, University Teknologi MARA Pahang were randomly selected for the study. The selection was based on their proficiency levels, categorised as proficient, satisfactory, and modest ESL achievers. The distinction between these three groups of achievers was based on their performance in *'BEL120-Consolidating Language Skills',* which is a subject to assess candidates' English language proficiency. Students who obtained Grade A+, A, and A- were categorized as ESL proficient achievers, those with Grade B+, B, and B- were categorized as ESL satisfactory users, and those with Grade C+, C, and C- as the ESL modest achievers.Primary data were collected using a survey questionnaire. The questionnaire, which comprised eleven item was adapted from Lee (2010) based on Gaudart (2003) and Christine (2007). Gaudart (2003) used a self-rating scale to find out the degree of respondents' use of code-switching (Malay and English) among bilingual students and teachers while Christine (2007) highlighted the functions of code switching. Each of the sections on the reading strategies requires the respondents to evaluate a statement based on a five-point Likert scale; 'never', 'rarely', 'sometimes', 'a lot of time', and 'always'. The data from the questionnaire were analysed using both descriptive statistics for the scores of mean, standard deviation, frequency, and percentage and inferential statistics for correlation measures.

## 4. Findings and discussions

### 4.1 Learners' perception towards code-switching

The result of the survey showed that a majority of learners have positive attitudes towards code switching in the English language classrooms. As table 1 illustrates, 86.7% (n=39) of the respondents agree that code switching should be used in the English language classrooms. The figure shows that only six out of the 45 respondents were against code switching when English language teaching is concerned,

Table 1. Should teacher code-switch while teaching as second language?

| Response | Frequency | Percentage | Mean | SD |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Yes | 39 | 86.7 | | |
| No | 6 | 13.3 | | |
| | | | 1.13 | .344 |

Table 2 shows that 82.2% (n=37) of the learners think code switching helps them learn in English language. Only eight learners perceived it as not helping with learning. However, as to what extent it should be used, Table 3 shows 68.9% (n=31) chose *sometimes* while 11.1% (n=5) prefer it to be used *rarely*.

Table 2. Do you think teachers' code-switch helps you learn English better?

| Response | Frequency | Percentage | Mean | SD |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Yes | 37 | 82.2 | | |
| No | 8 | 17.7 | | |
| | | | 1.07 | .252 |

Table 3. How often do you think code switching should be used in the English classroom?

| Response | Frequency | Percentage | Mean | SD |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Rarely | 5 | 11.1 | | |
| Sometimes | 31 | 68.9 | | |
| A lot of time | 9 | 20 | | |
| | | | 3.09 | .557 |

The majority of the learners indicated that code switching should be used in the English classroom (86.7%). However, the current finding is a bit low as compared to a study done in China, in which a higher percentage of 94.2% was recorded. Looking at it from the teachers' perspective, 93.3% of the teachers in Jianxia (2009) and 85.7% of Lee (2010) agreed that code-switching should be employed as part of second language classroom interaction. Thus, the findings of both teachers and students' perceptions show there is no conflict between students' and teachers' perception towards the use of code switching in English as Second Language classroom.

In comparison to 88% of the students who perceived code switching should be employed in second language classroom (Lee, 2010), 82.2% of the students of current research believe that code switching would help them learn the target language. 68.9% of them said that although it should be used and that it helps learning, code switching is to be used only *sometimes* or *occasionally*. This finding is in line with Jingxia (2009) who recorded that a majority of the students perceived that code switching should either be *sometimes* or *occasionally* used in classroom settings. Recognizing that these three items measure learners' attitudes towards code switching, it can be concluded that ESL learners have a positive perception towards code switching. They do code switch in times of need or when necessary.

The attitudes towards code switching can vary from one place to another even though it may be practised by many. Asmah (2004) stated that code switching is a feature of most Malaysian who are multilingual in which Malaysians are said to be able to change from one language to another with great ease. Gaudart (2003) also stated that perception towards bilingualism in Malaysia have been consistently positive. Bilingualism is widely acceptable and considered as a part of diverse cultures of Malaysia. It happens frequently among speakers who can perfectly understand each other in both of the codes used.

Learners perceive that teachers should use code switching in the language classroom setting and this teacher's code switching practice does help learning. The high frequency of 'sometimes' (68.9%) shows that learners perceive it necessary to limit the use of code switching and for specific purposes only. It should not be extensively done because English is the language being learnt in the classroom. Therefore, the researchers suggest that the use of the target language should be maximized.

This finding reflects a study by other Malaysian researchers. Then and Ting (2009) who conducted a study on three secondary school teachers in Sarawak found that code switching is employed at various levels, from kindergarten to university level. Teachers in Malaysia were found to code switch during the teaching and learning process to restate, to call for attention, and most importantly to facilitate understanding and building of vocabulary knowledge. It shows that learners are exposed to code switching in the language classroom for reiteration and comprehension. Thus, the findings indicate that code switching is adopted by teachers and its usage is purposeful.

## 4.2. Functions of code-switching in ESL classroom

The results in Table 4 suggest that learners prefer the instructors to code switch for a variety of functions. Again, more respondents responded *sometimes* for all of the functions listed, consistent with the results presented earlier in Table 3 that they prefer the instructors to code switch *sometimes* in the English language classroom.

Items which received *sometimes* at a 40% and above include giving instruction, giving feedback, checking comprehension, explaining grammar, explaining differences between first and second language, discussing assignment, test, and quizzes.

Table 4 Functions of code-switching in ESL classroom

| Function | Answer | Percentage | Mean | SD |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| [1] Giving instruction | Never | 4.4 | | |
| | Rarely | 24.4 | | |
| | Sometimes | 46.7 | | |
| | A lot of time | 20.0 | | |
| | Always | 4.4 | | |
| | | | 2.96* | .903 |
| [2] Giving feedback | Never | 8.9 | | |
| | Rarely | 24.4 | | |
| | Sometimes | 42.2 | | |
| | A lot of time | 20.0 | | |
| | Always | 4.4 | 2.87* | .991 |
| [3] Checking comprehension | Never | 11.1 | | |
| | Rarely | 17.8 | | |
| | Sometimes | 40.0 | | |
| | A lot of time | 26.7 | | |
| | Always | 2.2 | 2.91* | 1.007 |
| [4] Explaining new words | Rarely | 8.9 | | |
| | Sometimes | 33.3 | | |
| | A lot of time | 44.4 | | |
| | Always | 13.3 | | |
| | | | 3.62** | .834 |
| [5] Explaining grammar | Never | 4.4 | | |
| | Rarely | 20.0 | | |
| | Sometimes | 40.0 | | |
| | A lot of time | 31.1 | | |
| | Always | 4.4 | 3.11* | 9.73 |
| [6] Helping students feel more confident and comfortable | Rarely | 11.1 | | |
| | Sometimes | 33.3 | | |
| | A lot of time | 31.1 | | |
| | Always | 24.4 | | |
| | | | 3.69** | .973 |
| [7] Explaining differences between first and second language | Never | 4.4 | | |
| | Rarely | 13.3 | | |
| | Sometimes | 40.0 | | |
| | A lot of time | 35.6 | | |
| | Always | 6.7 | | |
| | | | 3.27* | .939 |
| [8] Discussing assignments, tests, and quizzes | Never | 8.9 | | |
| | Rarely | 17.8 | | |
| | Sometimes | 46.7 | | |
| | A lot of time | 24.4 | | |
| | Always | 2.2 | | |
| | | | 2.93* | .939 |

| Notes. | |
|---|---|
| - | Rarely /Never |
| * | Sometimes |
| ** | Always |

The results suggest that learners' perception vary with regard to the situations when code switching was adopted to serve the various function in the English language classrooms. It has been observed that the learners perceive the importance of teachers' code switching [4] when explaining new words and teachers' code switching

[6] helps students feel more confident and comfortable. Thus, this research supports the findings of Greggio & Gill (2007) and Jingxia (2009). It can be concluded that across languages, ethnicity and proficiency levels, students' perception on the function of teachers' code switching does not greatly vary.

In addition to the above, it is interesting to note here in Lee (2010), study on teachers' perception towards code switching in English as Second Language classroom, the teachers' perception (Lee, 2010) is a bit lower as compared to the students' perception (current study) on item [4] and [6]. As for the rest of the items, the students have responded *sometimes* for all of the functions, indicating that all the functions are equally important.

*4.3. Correlations: code-switching in explaining differences between first and second language, and helping students feel more confident and comfortable*

In relation to learners' consistent responses towards code switching between languages, it was noted that 'helping students feel more confident and comfortable' is the function with slight majority of respondents (24.4%) selected *always*. Code switching between the mother tongue and second language is regarded as helping students feel more comfortable while learning. In fact, the result of the analysis (Table 5) shows a significant relationship between function of code switching in explaining the differences between L1 and L2 and in helping students feel more confident and comfortable as indicated by the value of *r* = 0.491 thus indicating learners feel more comfortable and confident in understanding English language if the instructors use code switching for teaching and learning purposes.

Table 5 Correlation: Code-switching in explaining differences between first and second language and helping students feel more confident and comfortable

|  | Cumulative mean value | Pearson *R* |
|---|---|---|
| Code-switching in explaining differences between first and second language | 3.27 | 0.491* |
| Code-switching in helping students feel more confident and comfortable | 3.69 | |

A Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level.

The current finding confirms the earlier study by Collins (2001) that the usage of L1 contributes to reducing the affective barriers of second language learning. The use of L1 reduces students' language anxiety and eventually uplifts the affective environment for the study. It is believed that the use of the L1 helps when it is regarded as a means of communication of ideas.

It is acknowledged that Malaysians are second language speakers of English. However participants of the study consider it as a foreign language due to their lack of exposure and indeed feel challenged in such a setting. Thus, code switching is utilized to ease the tense.

Collins (2001) reports that learners encounter frustration over unsuccessful attempts in completing their language tasks. They are unable to reach the expectations set for them because of their level of proficiency. Hence, L1 is used to make them feel comfortable and secure in the form of translation and explanations in addition to language learning tips.

## 5. Conclusion

As a conclusion, there are several points that need to be highlighted in this study which are:

- A majority of the learners perceive teachers' code-switching as a must in their ESL classroom.
- A majority of the learners agree that teachers' code-switching help learners learn English better.
- Students agree that they would best benefit from various occasions of teachers' code-switching in an ESL classroom setting.

- There is a significant relationship between students' preference of teachers' code-switching in explaining differences between first and second language and students' preference of teachers' code-switching in helping students feel more confident and comfortable.

The findings of this research imply that the usage of code-switching in ESL classroom may facilitate learners learning process. It is also evident in this research, that these learners themselves are able to foresee which teachers' classroom interaction and practice result in optimum outcome if the teachers code-switch. Thus it allows more room for the learners to control and be responsible of their own learning.

It is suggested that future research look at the perceived difference in the use of code switch among teachers based on teachers' demographic and affective factors. It is also worthwhile to investigate the relationship between students' personality types and their preference towards teachers' code-switching. In addition, language learning strategies may also influence the extent of students' preference towards teachers' code-switching.

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