Code-switching as a strategy use in an EFL classroom in Taiwan

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Abstract

This article aims to present the use of code-switching in an English classroom. A general English class with 36 sophomore students from different departments (music, Japanese, management and so on) and an English lecturer with over 20-year teaching experience were involved in this study. The EFL classroom was tape -recorded and then the functions of the code-switching were analyzed on the basis of Hyme's (1962) framework. In addition, after the class observation, participants, including the lecturer and students, needed to fill in one questionnaire related to the use of code-switching and the use of native language in an EFL classroom. Finally, a post-interview of the lecturer was used to explain the lecturer's point of view about the use of code-switching and native language during the English learning class. In sum, this study indicates that the use of code-switching and L1 would facilitate the second language learning. Thus, L1 could be a useful and important element to help L2 learners to learn the foreign language during the learning process.

Introduction

Since 1990s, numbers of studies started to examine an issue related to the target (L2) and native (L1) use in an EFL classroom. In the past, some studies proposed L1 use contrasted the pedagogy of teaching English through English (Chambers,1991; Halliwell & Jones,1991). For those studies, teaching through the target language makes the language authentic and helps learners to be familiar with the whole English environment. This statement supports Krashen (1981)'s comprehensible input and natural order hypothesis. However, recently, this English-only pedagogy has been questioned and some research studies show that L1 is also beneficial in English learning classrooms. Guthrie (1984) has early questioned that whether the fact that a class is conducted entirely in the target language results in greater intake by those learners. It seems that the debate between L1 and L2 use has existed for a long time.   As a result, the purpose of this study is to examine the use of code-switching in an English classroom and from the results, the researcher tried to investigate if L1 is necessary in English learning processes and them provide some implications for future teaching.

Code-switching use in class

Code-switching, including mixing, transferring, and borrowing, is the use of

two languages simultaneously or interchangeably (Valdes-Fallis, 1977). Also, code-switching is a common phenomenon that people use to convey a complete idea. When students are unable to conceive an appropriate word within a limited amount of time, code-switching, in some cases, allows them to express themselves more fluidly (Weinreich, 1970).

As we know, there are copies of research studies arguing that the strategy of code-switching can be a useful tool in assisting English language teaching and learning process. Code-switching helps the senders transfer the information to the receivers effectively (Skiba, 1997). Thus, code-switching has positive effect on learning processes. On the other hand, Ellis (1994), Cook (2001), and Richards and Rodgers (2001) who are specialized in second language acquisition stated that although the exposure to the target language (L2) can help learners to achieve success, this exposure may not always work effectively in every context. There are still lots of factors affecting the learning success. For example, English- only classroom would lead to frustration and anxiety because the learners can not get enough and proper comprehensible input. Based on above arguments, code-switching could be a strategy used by teachers to help learners. Various positive functions of code-switching, such as explaining new vocabulary, grammar, new concepts and relaxing learners would improve the learners' comprehensible input during the learning process (Ahmad & Jusoff, 2009).

To sum up, on the basis of above discussion, there are three major research questions involved in this study:

1. What are the functions of code-switching used by the teacher in class?
2. What are the students' feedback and attitudes towards the use of code-switching in class?
3. What are the teacher's feedback and attitudes towards the use of code-switching in class?

Methodology
Subjects

A total number of 36 non-English major sophomore students and an experienced English lecturer in the course of "language training" from a university of New Taipei City were involved in this study. Based on the entrance exam in Taiwan, all of the students were divided into several classes (A,B,C level). This class belongs to Level B (intermediate level). In addition, this class was consisted of several different developments in this university—Applied Japanese, Applied music and religion. Then the English lecturer in this study is a male Taiwanese teacher teaching over 20 years in this school, who is responsible for language training course

in this school.

Instruments

1. Classroom observation

The researcher observed and video recorded the class conversations for 30 minutes.   During the observation, the researcher recorded the teacher's speech in the class.   Also the research took notes on code-switching between Chinese and English when it occurred.

2. Questionnaire

A questionnaire was used to investigate students a feedback and attitude to the code-switching use (L1 use) in the English classroom.   For students' questionnaire, there are seven major questions related the use of code-switching during the teaching.   Students needed to provide their opinions to see if they think L1 is important during the teaching process.   For example, when and why did he use L1 during the teaching? In addition, in order to avoid participants' misunderstanding about the questionnaire, this study used the two questionnaires in Chinese version to help subjects understand clearly.

3. Post-interview

After the teaching a short post-interview was conducted in this study.   The lecturer needed to answer the following questions related to his teaching philosophy and his opinions towards the use of code-switching.   The following questions were adapted from Hou's (2006) study.   The interview questions are listed as follows:

1. The teaching background
2. Philosophy of teaching
3. The percentage of L1 use in class
4. Students' comprehension of the teacher's English use

Procedure

Classroom Observation (30mins)

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Students' questionnaire (15mins)

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Post-interview (10 mins)
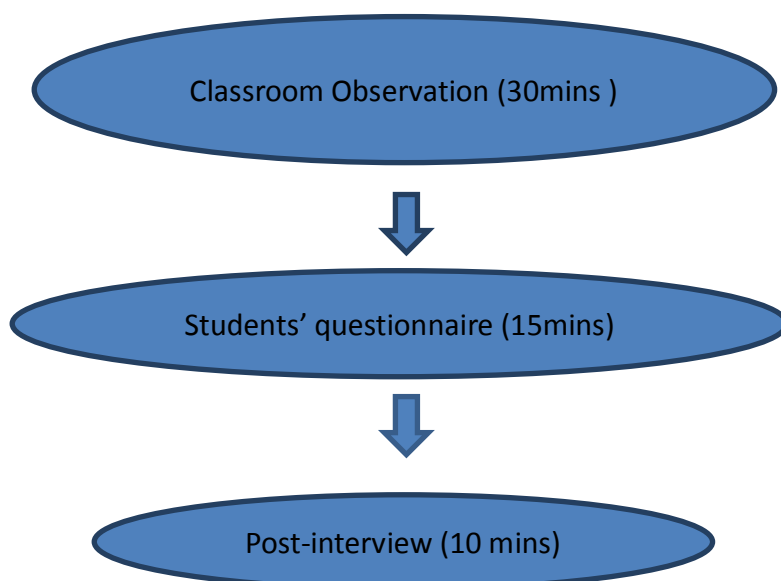
Results and discussion

      0bserved data were analyzed in EFL context of the research questions presented in previous section. According to the three research questions, this section was divided into three major parts. The first part is the different functions of the teacher's code-switching use during teaching. The researcher adapted Hymes (1962)'s framework, which included expressive, directive, metalinguistic, poetic and referential functions to analyze the speakers' uses of code-switching in classroom setting. Then, the second part is students' feedback to the use of code-switching in the class. Finally, the third part is the teacher's attitude towards his teaching philosophy.

The functions of the teacher's code-switching use

      According to Hymes (1962), there were five basic functions about code-switching/mixing. In the following the researcher analyzed the teacher's teaching in this course based on Hymes' framework.

(1) Expressive Functions

      The teacher used code-switching to express the emotions. Chinese words are often inserted to express the true feelings. For example:

Ex1: (20:28)

T: If the vending machine did not return back your money, you will say "你這個笨機器"

(2) Directive Functions

      Generally speaking, this function is used in a situation where a speaker wants to direct someone. This function can get the listeners' attention. In addition, this function often occurred in both social equals and social unequals. According to Hymes, there are two subcategories: (a) direction / persuasion and (b) social exclusion. Here are some examples:

Ex1: (5:05)

T: 把桌上的東西收起來。(Please remove all the things from your desk.)

Ex2: (12:30)

T: 我們看下一個。(Let's move to the next one.)

Ex3 (13:10)

T:下一個生字，Let's go. (Please look at the next word. Let's go.)

Ex4 (15:21)

T: 我們開始聽這一小段 (Let's start to listen to this paragraph.)

Ex5: (23:52)

T: Doris, 你有話要說嗎? That will be good. (Doris, do you have anything to say? That will be good.)

(3) Matalinguistic Functions

It includes the definition of terms, paraphrasing others' words, and some metaphors. Especially metaphors exist between equals but other functions can exist between equals and unequals.

Ex1: (9:57)

T: Survey. Survey 就是調查,你在做研究的時候,你可以用這個來找出答案。
(When doing research, you can use this tool to find the answers.)

Ex2: (10:40)

T: Empathy. 同情,一種同情的表現。About 對一種問題了表同情之意。
(Empathy, a kind of performance, can be used to express empathy to some questions.)

Ex3: (17:35)

T: 有人知道 What's up 的意思嗎? What's up means how are you? 你跟你朋友打招呼的時候會用。
(Do you know the meaning of "what's up?" "What's up means how are you. You can use it to say hello to your friends.)

Ex4: (18:01)

T: Vending machine. 自動販賣機,你把錢放進去機器裡面,然後用手去按按鈕,就可以買想要的東西。
(Vending machine is a kind of machine. You put your money into this machine and press the bottom, and then you can buy what you want.)

Ex5: (23:09)

T: A disappointing situation. Disappointing 是一個形容詞,令人失望的一刻。
(Disappointing is an adjective.)

(4) Poetic Functions

About poetic functions, it means that during the conversation, the speaker inserted some jokes, stories, some poetic quotations into an English- based conversation. During the teaching, the researcher did not find any examples related to this function. No related examples were found in the teacher's teaching.

(5) Referential Functions

According to Chen's (2003) explanations, referential function has following categories.　The first one is terms that lack readily available in the other languages. The second one is terms that lack semantically appropriate words in other languages. The final one is that terms with which the speakers are more familiar in L1 than in L2. Also, here, no related examples were found in the teacher's teaching.

From the above analysis, the research found that most of the time, the teacher use code-switching to give students' instructions, to explain complex concepts, and to explain the difficult words.　From the teacher's perspective, the teacher used lots of different code-switching skills to make the students to understand what the teacher taught and also keep the teaching fluent.　Here, the teacher use code-switching of direct functions to control his students to ensure students can understand the instructions and then follow the class schedule.　Further, the teacher used the code-switching to express the meanings of the new vocabulary and some complex concepts, such as grammar and some explanations.　As a teacher, using this function can help students to understand what they have to learn in a class and then students may not feel confused easily.

Students' feedback to the use of code-switching in the class

The questions contained in this questionnaire were analyzed and explained as follows:

Question 1: Do you like your teacher use Chinese in this English course?

Not at all	A little	sometimes	Very much
0	0	14/36 (39%)	22/36 (61%)

Question 2: In your opinion, when do you think Chinese is necessary in the English learning class? (Multiple choices)

Define new vocabulary	Practice translation	Explain complex grammar rules	Explain complex concepts	Provide instructions	Suggest how to learn English efficiently
20/112(18%)	18/112(16%)	26/112(23%)	25/112(22%)	14/112(13%)	9/112(8%)

Question3: If you think using Chinese is necessary, what is the major reason?

Understanding complex concepts	Understanding new vocabulary	Reducing anxiety	Catching up with the class procedure
16/36(44%)	13/36(36%)	6/36(17%)	1/36(3%)

Question 4: Do you think it is helpful to use Chinese in the English learning class?

No	A little	much	Very much
0	14/36(39%)	18/36(50%)	4/36(11%)

Question 5: How often did the teacher use Chinese in this class?

No	A little	Sometimes	Much
0	2/36(6%)	30/36(83%)	4/36(11%)

Question 6: In your opinion, what is the percentage should the teacher use Chinese in class?

10%	20%	30%	40%	50%	60%	70%	80%
0	2/36(6%)	16/36(44%)	12/36(33%)	5/36(14%)	1/36(3%)	0	0

Overall, students confirmed that the use of code-switching us necessary in EFL teaching. 61 percent of students like the use of Chinese in their English learning process. Moreover, a total of 23 percent if the students indicated that it is necessary for the teacher to use L1 to explain complex grammar rules. Besides that, 22 percent of students indicated that it is necessary for the teacher to use L1 to explain complex concepts. In addition, 36 percent of students stated that L1 can help them to understand new vocabulary. These findings correspond to Ahmad and Jusoff (2009)'s study. Those students perceived that the use of code-switching has helped them understand difficult concepts faced in their learning. In addition, the teacher's code-switching has helped them understand the grammar being taught. Also, students perceived that they are satisfied with the use of L1 during their learning. They think the use of L1 in class is related to their learning success.   If the teacher can use L1 appropriately in class, students can reduce some anxiety and get some psychological support. As a result, learning success requires successful provision of comprehensible input to ensure that students understand the content, the grammar rules, complex concepts and so on (Tang, 2002).

In sum, English learning success involves students' ability to use English effectively, which means students can understand the teacher's input and try to intake the knowledge the teacher provides in class.   As we know, an English-only

classroom cannot always guarantee the comprehensible input.   Thus, the use of code-switching by the teacher can be seen as a kind of teaching strategy to help students.

The teacher's feedback and the teaching philosophy

As mentioned above, there are four major areas for the interview questions:
1.   The teaching background
2.   Philosophy of teaching
3.   The percentage of L1 use in class
4.   Students' comprehension of the teacher's English use

Question 1: How long did you teach English? What kind of course are you responsible for?

Ans: Actually, I have been taught English over 20 years.   At school, I am responsible for several different courses, such as language training, grammar, linguistics, reading and so on.

Question 2: What is your philosophy of teaching?
Ans: I emphasize the interaction between teachers and students.   Thus, I hope my students can achieve the goal of communication.   In addition, I hope students can find answers by themselves.   Thus, I always encourage them to asking questions and also I will ask them some questions in class.   I do not like to become a class controller.   I hope I can be a facilitator to help them to improve their English ability.

Question 3: How much L1 do you use in class?
Ans: It depends on what kind of course I teach now.   If this is an oral practice course, I would not use L1 so often.   For oral practice, the goal is to help students to speak out.   Thus, I would encourage them to use L2 even they still make some mistakes.   However, if the course requires more complex concepts, I would use L1 more.   Thus, students will be more familiar with these concepts and also reduce the anxiety.

Question 4: Take this class as an example.   Do you think your students can understand the content of this class?

Ans: From this class, I found it seems that some students can not catch up with the class schedule.　If I just use L2 to express some meanings, students start to feel confused and then start to lose the attention in class.　As a result, for the next class, I think I would use more L1 to help them.

Conclusion

　　　From the above findings, overall, the findings indicated that most students have positive attitude to the teacher's code-switching use in this EFL classroom. First, students like the teacher to use L1 inn their English class.　Second, students think it is necessary for the teacher to use L1 in explaining complex grammar rules, complex concepts, and defining new vocabulary.　Third, students indicate using L1 in class can help them understand complex concepts and reduce anxiety.　On the other hand, from the teacher's perspective, it is necessary to use L1 in class but still the teacher need to pay attention to the goals of each course.　L1 is effective in some courses related to some complex concepts. However, if the course is related to the goal of communication, such as oral practice, the teacher can try to reduce the use of L1 and then encourage students to use L2 in class even they would make some mistakes.　But basically, code-switching is still a strategy teachers can try to use to help learners.　It is suggested that the strategy of code-switching un EFL classroom is not always a deficiency in language learning, but may be considered as a kind of useful strategy in learning a language.

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