An Investigation of Code-switching in Chinese College English Classroom: Teachers and Students' Attitude

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Abstract: Code switching is inevitable phenomenon in Chinese EFL classroom. In spite of its disadvantages, code switching is helpful and beneficial to teachers and students in the process of teaching and learning. This research aims to investigate English language teachers and students from Guilin University of Technology to find out their attitude toward code switching and what functions code switching has in the English classroom. The result shows that code switching is rather necessary and has functions of translation, better communication, humor and giving feedback.

Key words: code switching, EFL classroom, function

Ⅰ Introduction

Code-switching (also code switching or CS), one of the major studies in the sociolinguistic field, is the practice of moving back and forth between two languages or between two dialects or registers of the same language at one time (Richard, 2019). The use of code switching usually occurs during foreign language teaching-learning processes especially when studying English based on the different backgrounds and reasons (Yusuf, 2009), which makes code switching an interesting and intriguing study in foreign language teaching-learning. Quite a lot of studies about code switching have attached great importance to its pros and cons in the teaching process, thus there is disagreement as to whether code switching should be included or excluded in both EFL and ESL settings, thus

Some experts and practitioners argue that English should be the only medium of instruction in the English language classroom and the use of L1 will be detrimental to the learning of L2. This is why traditional Grammar Translation Method has been replaced by new pedagogies such as Direct Method and Audio Lingual method, which emphasize the importance of giving students' exposure to L2 input as much as possible. The use of L1 in classroom is sign or laziness, sloppiness and any other weaknesses during teaching and learning process (Sridhar, 1996). Cook (2001) assumed that L2 can only grow properly if it is developed independent of the first language and learners must develop the ability to think in their L2 and thus the two languages should be kept separate in the mind as it is. He (2011) also believed that using L1 will deprive students of genuine experience of interaction through L2.

In comparison, there are still some scholars and educators who are in favor of code switching and regard it as a helpful tool for both teaching and learning. Liao (2006) found in her study that students in English only classrooms remain silent and nervous. Paradowski (2008) held that the use of L1 should also be encouraged in EFL classroom because it will activate the prior knowledge of L2. After conducting an empirical study about the impact of English-only and bilingual approaches to EFL instruction on low-achieving bilinguals in Cameroon, Patrick and Enama (2016) concluded that the use of French in the EFL classroom does not hinder learning and French is an effective scaffolding tool in the EFL classroom in Cameroon.

Code switching is inevitable phenomenon in the teaching-learning process. In spite of disadvantages, code switching should be viewed as an asset and helpful tool but so far not many studies focus on how to efficiently and rationally employ code switching in the teaching-learning process so that it can best serve teaching and learning. Eva (2017) in her research found that code switching has 14 functions such as clarification, reiteration or repetition, explanation, asking, translation, checking for understanding, emphasizing a language element, making inferences, developing vocabulary, class discussions of student task, giving feedback, aiding memorization, class management and entertainment.

Thus, this research aims to investigate teachers and students' attitude toward code switching and what functions code switching serves in the English language classroom, which can guide teachers to rationally use code switching to facilitate their teaching and improve their teaching efficiency.

Ⅱ Methodology

A qualitative descriptive method will be employed in the study wherein 6 English language teachers and 12 freshmen from Guilin University of Technology have to answer two open questions: 1. What is your perspective towards code switching in the English classroom, necessary or not? Why? 2. What are functions of code switching in the English classrooms? Which function do you use most?.

Participants' consent was obtained prior to the distribution of the questionnaire. Purpose sampling is used in this research. Three male and three female English language teachers are respectively in their 30s, 40s, and 50s, so that their teaching experiences can range from less than 10 years to almost 30 years. Also, 12 freshmen are non-English major and their English proficiency can be leveled as low, medium and high according to their English grade of College Entrance Exam. Data will be collected through QQ, a social media like Messenger. In order to make the interview valid, English version of questionnaire are offered to English language teachers who are supposed to answer in English, while Chinese version of questionnaire for students who answer in Chinese in case some of them have difficulty understanding the questions or expressing themselves. Afterwards, the researcher will translate these answers into English. Data that are gathered from the questions will be read, coded, arranged, analysed and finally interpreted.

Ⅲ Result

Teachers' attitude towards code switching

In terms of the first question, all participating teachers think code switching quite necessary. One of them believes that code switching in EFL classroom helps students learn and facilitates students with their learning proficiency and it also helps language teachers to teach efficiently. Another teacher replies that the positive role of code switching as a significant teaching strategy cannot be ignored and it makes the communication between teachers and students more smooth and foreign language teaching activities more efficient. 5 of them agree that teachers' English proficiency may be one of major factors for using code switching.

As for the second question, teachers use code switching for humor, translation, better communication and giving feedback. For example, one participating teacher says:

Code switching helps the teacher to exactly express himself/herself and sometimes makes the teaching activities more humorous, which ensures a more smooth communication between the teacher and students. When I give feedback, I sometimes utter a sentence in Guilin dialect to draw students' attention to me.

Another teacher says:

The use of code switching can help the teachers in explaining grammar, vocabulary, difficult sentences and translation, which facilitates the students' learning. Most of the time, code switching is use in my classroom in interpreting literary works.

Students' attitude toward code switching

For all participating students, all of them also agree that code switching is quite crucial, especially for those who perform poorly in English. One student who is good at English says:

Code switching enables us to better understand teachers. Using English only will make us feel tired and unable to stay focused all the time, which may in turn lead to low teaching and learning efficiency

Another student who is very poor in English answers:

It is very necessary to employ Mandarin in English classroom because I barely understand and follow the teacher if he/she uses English only.

As for the functions of code switching in the classroom, most of participating students think that code switching can help them to better understand difficult sentences and vocabulary, and remain attentive as one of participants says:

Sometimes I will run into new words which require teachers to use Mandarin to explain their meanings. Also, it is better to use Mandarin to explain key points and contents in both exam papers and articles, which is rather beneficial to the study of those who are poor in English.

This research confirms the necessity of code switching in Chinese EFL classroom and code switching has the functions of translation, better communication, humor and giving feedback in in the process of teaching and learning.

Ⅳ Discussion

English, as a foreign language in China, is only used in classroom. Unlike some countries such as the Philippines, there is no good language environment for students to practice English. Moreover, most English teachers have no experiences of living or studying in English-speaking countries, which may limit teachers' English proficiency. In this case, only English in the classroom can be quite challenging. Therefore, code switching is unavoidable and beneficial in Chinese EFL classroom. However, overusing code-switching may affect the students' optimization of using English compared to the class which uses English all the time (Jingxia, 2010). Thus, based on the above explained functions, Chinese English language teachers should rationally employ code switching in the classroom, especially in terms of vocabulary and grammar, literature evaluation, and discussions of exam papers and articles.

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