

Psycholinguistic Code Switching in Iranian University Classroom Context

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Abstract

This study dealt with code-switching in EFL classroom contexts at tertiary level in Iran, where English instruction tends to begin late at secondary schools. It aimed to explore the 'trigger words' responsible for cognitive code switching using Clyne's (2003) classification, the possible functions of code switching, as well as the EFL instructors' perceptions of code switching. To achieve these objectives, one general English class and one ESP class for computer major students were observed and the two classroom instructors were interviewed. Analysis of data revealed that triggered code switching manifestations in both EFL contexts were different, with the greater frequency of code switching taking place in engineering ESP context. Moreover, 'proper nouns' and 'lexical transfer' were the frequently observed types of trigger words responsible for code switching in General and ESP contexts respectively. It also displayed the six functions code switching served in Iranian EFL classrooms. The EFL instructors believed that code-switching was an effective teaching strategy when facing low English proficient learners. They perceived it useful regarding various functions that it served in Iranian EFL classrooms.

Keywords: Psycholinguistics, code switching, trigger words

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1. Introduction

Code alternation or switching, a broadly studied phenomenon in the speech patterns of bilingual and multilingual speakers, has always been a major concern in EFL/ESL contexts. Simply defined by Nunan and Carter (2001) as "a phenomenon of switching from one language to another in the same discourse" (p. 275), it has also received great attention from SLA researchers. Myers-Scotten (1993), for instance, argues that code switching helps bilingual students enhance the flexibility of expression, exceeding the style switching of monolinguals. In other words, by having access to more than one language, the bilingual student is capable of removing obstacles at sentential planning level. Code switching is also considered by Jacobson (1983) as a tool for the acquisition of subject-appropriate vocabulary in first and second language. It is an

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important instrument in enhancing teaching and learning processes in that it helps students at lower proficiency levels better comprehend ideas and convey their thoughts (Schweers, 1999; Tang, 2002; Greggio & Gil, 2007).

However, code switching has been considered by some researchers as an indicator of poor proficiency in one language. The other language is used to compensate for the difficulties students have in communicating with the first language (Skiba, 1997). Ellis (1984) considers the negative effect of teachers' use of code switching in second language classrooms as depriving students of their rights of second language achievements. Referring to the interference role of code switching and its error-proneness nature, Cook (2001) stresses that code switching should be strongly avoided in the classroom.

Code switching has been frequently studied from different perspectives. Linguistically, according to Myers-Scotton (1993), code alternation is grammatical by nature and highly depends on the bilingual's fluency in the two languages. Sociolinguistically, it is concerned with the way people use it as a discourse-enhancer in their daily speech. Crystal (1987), for example, refers to the possible sociolinguistic reasons for using code switching such as the speaker's inability to express himself or herself in one language as a result of fatigue or emotional state, his or her desire to show unity with a special group, and the tendency to communicate his or her attitudes toward a listener. Referring to the six functions of code switching including quotation, addressee specification, interjection, repetition, message qualification, personification or objectification, Gumperz (1982) considers it as a special discourse strategy which bilinguals usually use for different purposes during their communications.

Recent advances in psycholinguistic research have been concerned with code-switching as a natural product of the interaction of the bilingual's two languages. For instance, Vogt (1954, p. 368) considers code switching as a psychological phenomenon whose causes are "obviously extralinguistic." That is, it does not occur merely as a result of language use but by the mental processes taking place in the bilingual's brain (Franceschini, 1998, p.65). Moreover, Clyne (1991) refers to "psycholinguistically motivated" code switching promoted by trigger words which imply that it is neither sociolinguistic nor grammatical use of language, but the cognitive processes happening in the speakers' mind that prompt alternation of language. According to Clyne (1991, p.193), trigger words are "words at the intersection of two language systems, which, consequently, may cause speakers to lose their linguistic bearings and continue the sentence in the other language." They cause alternation when the two language share similar lexical items. Such lexical items provide information both about cognitive representation processes of bilingualism and about bilingual language processing (Riehl, 2005).

The hypothesis of triggering, introduced by Clyne (1980, 2003), is concerned with the facilitating role played by words which tend to make code switching smoother. Clyne (2003) points out that trigger words consist of such items as 'lexical transfer', 'bilingual homophones', and 'proper nouns.' Discourse markers are also inserted under the label of bilingual homophones. The basis of present study is also on the classification set forth by Clyne (2003).

Given the above concerns, it is clear that most research in code switching (CS) has been concerned with its occurrence in natural bilingual and multilingual social contexts (Gumpers, 1982; Cheng & Bultler, 1989; Kachru 1989) Few studies have been conducted on code switching in foreign language classrooms especially in Iranian EFL classrooms with regard to psycholinguistic aspects (Yaqubi & Doqaruni, 2009). It is worth mentioning that English language teaching in Iran starts at secondary schools, followed by pre-university English, General English, and finally Specialized English courses at tertiary level. Insufficient exposure to English language makes students and teachers more eager to code switch during classroom interactions. Consequently, due to the growing application of code switching in Iranian EFL classrooms, including General English and Especial English courses as well as its role in teacher-student interactions, and because of the dearth of research done in this area at tertiary education in Iran, this study was conducted to fill the gap in this area.

Therefore, the aim of this study was first to present how different EFL instructors used code switching and second to deal with the instructors' cognitive reasons for CS by referring to those lexical items that serve as a trigger for switching from one language to another based on Clyne's classification (1991). Therefore, the following questions were raised in this study:

1-Which trigger words are responsible for cognitive code switching in different Iranian EFL classroom contexts?

2-What are the functions of code switching in Iranian EFL classroom contexts?

3-What are the instructors' perceptions of code switching in an EFL classroom?

2. Method

2.1. Design of the study

To answer the research questions as formulated above, this study employed a qualitative method. That is, it was based on in-class observations, together with field notes and recordings, which were followed by interviews.

2.2 Participants

The participants of the study were two English instructors teaching General and ESP courses at Islamic Azad University, Kashan branch, Iran. The general English instructor was a 33-year-old man teaching Pre-university and General English courses for at least five years at this university and EFL courses for at least ten years at language schools. The ESP instructor who was teaching English for computer students was a middle-aged man with at least fourteen years experience of teaching ESP courses for different engineering fields especially for computer engineering. They were both Iranian and were proficient users of English holding a Master's degree in TEFL and were teaching at the same university. Moreover, they both shared similar educational and socio-economical backgrounds getting their MA from one of Iranian Islamic Azad universities.

2.3 Data collection and Analysis

Two instruments were used in this study: observation and interview. The focus of this study was on two EFL classrooms including one general English course and one ESP course for computer majors. These EFL classrooms were selected in order to observe the nature of code switching across two different EFL contexts and disciplines. Each class was carefully observed and audio-taped for about three hours by the researcher assistant in addition to taking field notes for both EFL contexts.

The interview included open-ended questions regarding the participants' perception of code switching as well as their perspectives on the use and functions of code switching within an EAP classroom context.

3. Results and discussions

This section presents the results on code-switching in both EFL classrooms. In the ten excerpts included in this section, transcriptions of Persian sentences in italics were used to indicate the original code switching to Persian and the equivalent English translations are given next to it within parenthesis. The function of code-switching is indicated above the utterance in bold letters in the functions section.

Before proceeding to describe the results of the study, it is worth mentioning that the number of times the General English instructor switched to Persian was considerably less than that of the ESP instructor. Another important fact to reemphasize is that the focus of this study is on code switching from a psycholinguistic perspective based on Clyne (ibid) 's classification of trigger words which tends to be different from other studies conducted on cognitive and linguistic aspects of code switching.

Clyne's (1991) classification of 'trigger words' includes proper nouns, lexical transfer, bilingual homophones and discourse markers. By listening to six-hour audio-taped classrooms, the researchers obtained the following results:

3.1 Trigger words in General English context

'Proper nouns' are considered to be those words which do not have "translation equivalent in the other language but are used in both languages in a phonologically identical form" (Riehl, 2005, p. 1947). After analysis of audio-taped data, it was found that the instances of code switching at proper nouns just appeared in General English class compared with ESP context in which more technical words and terms were used. The following excerpt was taken from the General English classroom context.

- (1) T : Which one of you is going to take a trip in the New Year holidays?
S : I want to travel to Kerman in order to visit my grandma.
T : Oh, Kerman....did you know that Kerman is famous for '**Kolompeh**'?
kolompeh ta hala khordin?ye joor kolooche ke makhsuse Kermane...hatman emtehan konin .(Have you ever eaten 'Kolompeh', a kind of cookie special for Kerman? Try it for sure).
S : *Bale, kheili khoshmazas...soghati miarim*
(Yes. It is so delicious. I will bring it for you as souvenir.)

In this instance 'Kolompeh', which is regarded as a proper noun, caused the teacher to code switch from English to Persian and even students were encouraged to shift to Persian accordingly. This example is in line with Clyne's (1994, cited in Riehl, 2005) example of 'Gnadenenthal', a community in Australia used both in English and German, which caused switching from German to English as a 'proper noun'.

Regarding the other types of 'trigger words', no instances of code switching triggered by 'lexical transfer', or 'bilingual homophones' were observed in General English classroom. One reason may be that homophones usually appear in genetically related languages and since English and Persian are not considered as genetically related languages, no instances of code switching triggered by homophones was observed.

Among discourse markers, 'OK' was found to be the only word which triggered code switching from Persian to English in this context. The following excerpt clarifies the role of 'OK' in General English course.

- (2) T : *bahse emrooz raje be tafrih o mosafirate* (today's discussion is about recreation and traveling). **OK**,
Let's talk about different ways of travelling.....how do you like to travel?
S : by airplane or train.

Here the discourse marker 'OK' prompted the teacher to switch from Persian to English. Although the discourse marker 'OK' constituted a smaller proportion of code switching instances in Iranian EFL context, in Riehl's study (2005), which is based on English-German bilingual speech communities, discourse markers served as the most frequent causes of code switching. One reason may be that these markers have been completely integrated into the recipient language system through borrowing from the contact language as a result of the basic similarities between English and German (Riehl, 2005). However, due to linguistic

differences between English and Persian languages, the only discourse marker that has been borrowed from English and triggers code switching turned out to be the word 'OK'.

4.2 Trigger words in ESP context

Careful analysis of the audio-taped data of the ESP classroom displayed no instances of code switching triggered by 'proper nouns' or 'bilingual homophones'. Therefore, 'lexical transfer' and 'discourse markers' (merely 'OK') were just responsible for code switching from a psycholinguistic perspective. Clyne (2003) considered lexical transfer as the items that are part of one language while do not belong the lexicon of the speaker of the other language. Examples of code switching prompted by these words are provided below:

- (3)T : There are different types of nonvolatile memories. One nonvolatile is 'flash'.
Ba hafezeye flash ke ashna hastin. Hamin hafezehaye kuchak o ghabele haml.
(you are all familiar with 'flash memory...those small and portable ones)
- S : *bale , kamelan* (yes, completely).

In the above example taken from the ESP context, the word 'Flash', which is considered to be prompted by 'lexical transfer', caused the teacher to code switch from English to Persian. In Persian the same word is used to refer to the same thing. It shares the same idea of "lexical transfers that are not phonologically integrated (or integrated at a low level only) in the language of interaction" as is discussed by Riehl (2005, p.1947).

The following excerpt has been taken from the ESP class which clarifies the role of 'OK'.

- 4)T : *Pas vozoohe tasvire manitor be te' dade pikselha bastegi dare.*
(So the monitor resolution depends on the number of pixels). **OK**, did you know that pixel is the combination of picture and element?
- S : No
- T : So, listen to the explanation provided in the book

In this example again, the discourse marker served as a trigger for code switching as was formerly discussed in General English context above.

4. The functions of code switching

In terms of code-switching functions in EFL classrooms, the observation and interviews of the participants of the study revealed that there were 6 functions of CS in both EFL contexts presented here.

4.1 Providing equivalent for the key words

English teachers often provide the equivalent of the key words to get their ideas across to low proficient students. In Iran, this vocabulary check can be practiced by offering the meaning of English words in Persian. Sometimes even untranslatable words are faced by instructors and in order to sustain the continuity of interaction, they code switch from English to Persian. An example from the data is shown here.

- (5)T : Do you know the meaning of the word 'menace' as appears in the context?
midunin maniye kalameye 'menace' be tori ke dar matn umade chye?
- S : *yani taghlid kardan.*

(It means imitating).

T : No...No. *yani tahdid o zahre cheshm.*

(It means threat and danger)

This example explains the functionality of code switching in classroom settings. In this case, the teacher applies code switching in order to transfer the necessary knowledge for the students for lexical clarity. Following the instruction in the target language, the teacher code switches to native language in order to clarify meaning, and in this way stresses the importance of the foreign language content for efficient comprehension. However, this function of code switching may have a harmful academic side effect. That is, a student who is aware that the teaching of the key words in the foreign language will be followed by a native language translation may not be interested enough to listen to the earlier instruction of those words in one language which leads to limited exposure to the foreign language (Mattson & Burenhult, 1999).

4.2 Explaining grammatical structures

Another function of code switching in both general and ESP classrooms was to clarify the grammatical structures of the second language. The two Persian instructors tended to code switch from English to Persian when they intended to help students understand the grammar of English lessons based on the difficulty level of the structure under study. The following data describes the function of CS in relation to grammar/structure in ESP classroom.

(6)T : What is the difference between passive and active voice?

Ss : We have somehow forgotten.

T : OK. In passive voice when we omit the subject of the active sentence and use the object in place of subject.

Manzooram in eke ma faele jomleye maloom ro hazf karde va az mafool dar jaye

fael estefade mikonim ; (I mean that we omit the subject of the active sentence and replace it by the object)

S : OK. *az fele 'to be' estefade mikonim.* (Do we use 'to be' verbs?)

T : *bale ba tavajoh be zamane jomle az moshtaghatash estefade mikonim* (yes, we use its' derivations based on the tense of the verb of the sentence).

This example is also in line with Mattson and Burenhult-Mattson's (1999) study which mentioned 'topic switch' as one of the functions of teachers' code switching, which is mostly observed in the instruction of grammatical structures. In these cases, language shift performed by the teacher is for the purpose of clarifying particular grammar points. Therefore, the students' attention is directed to the new knowledge by drawing upon code switching and through the use of native tongue. Accordingly, to make the new content comprehensible, the gap between known (native language) and unknown (new foreign language content) is filled by the use of code switching as it is also suggested by Cole (1998, p.1): "a teacher can exploit students' previous L1 learning experience to increase their understanding of L2."

4.3 Highlighting some lexical elements of vocabulary

Normally, English teachers employ code-switching to emphasize lexical elements of expressions. The purpose of doing so is to attract other participants' attention to the key elements. The elements of vocabulary emphasized are usually in the form of the first language (Persian). The examples of the function are presented in the following excerpt taken from the General English course.

- (7) T (reading): The Journal covered all the details of **quarrel** in the park. Do you know the difference among *quarrel* and *argument*? *tafavote manae in se kalame chye?* (what are the differences among them in terms of meaning?).
- S : *na hame be manie dava nistan.* (No, do they all mean 'fighting'?)
- T : No, they have somehow different meanings. *Quarrel be manie moshjereye por saro sedast. Ama argument bahs dar aramesh o sokoote.* (Quarrel means noisy aggressive encounters but argument is the act of discussing in a calm and polite manner). *Pas be tafavothaye jozeeye ma'naee deghat konin* .(so pay attention to the minor differences in meaning among synonyms).

The above example is concerned with the instructors' use of code switching to draw learners' attention to the detailed connotative meaning of the words by moving beyond the surface similarities in meaning. Raising awareness of the learners in this way "can be a useful way of accessing the students' schema and alerts them to potential challenges the new language may present them with" (Meyer, 2008, p.152). Moreover, it highlights the fact that translation of words or phrases within the context can be a useful way of illustrating differences which exist between the L1 and L2 (Meyer, 2008).

4.4 Inspiring students

In order to improve students' motivation to learn English and keep them interested, English teachers encourage students not to be afraid of making mistakes while involved in English language teaching and learning processes. English teachers apply code-switching from English to Persian to facilitate students' active engagement in the English learning context. The following data describes code-switching practices for the purpose of encouraging students.

- (8)T : Now please change this sentence into passive voice "He has paid the money".
- S : Silence.
- T : *negaran nabashin, hatta age eshtebah ham mikonin say konin fekr konin o javab bedin.* (Don't worry if you think you're making mistakes just try to think and reply).
- S : The money has been paid.
- T : *ye kam bishtar fek konin. Negarane dadane javabe eshtebah nabashin. Ta eshtebah nakonin dorostesho yad nemigirin* . (Think about it a little bit more, that's ok....don't worry about your mistakes. You don't learn the right forms unless you make mistakes).

The above example displays the concern of the teacher for having the learners in charge of their own learning while making errors. This highlights the Corder's (1955) idea which points out that when a learner makes an error, the most effective method to teach him the correct form is by helping him/her discover it and test different hypotheses than by just providing him with the correct form. That is, the learner should be given the opportunity of searching for the correct meaning and form. In the case of the above example, the teacher applied code switching to provide learners with the opportunity of guessing while not being afraid of making mistakes.

4.5 Expressing humor

In order to refresh students' minds and decrease their tension while facing English materials, the instructors tended to code switch from English to Persian from time to time through creating humor. Examples from the data are shown below.

- (9)T : Reze, answer this question: "What is your idea about punctuality?"
S : I think we have to be punctual all the time.
T : *jedan! Pas chera har jalase dir miai sare kelas?* (really! then why are you yourself late each session?)
S : laughing.

This example can also be related to the affective function of code switching highlighted by Mattson and Burenhult (1999) that serves to express emotions. In this respect, code switching is applied by the teacher in order to establish a feeling of togetherness as well as intimate relations with the students. Accordingly, it may lead to the creation of a reassuring language environment in which students feel at ease to communicate and at the same time enjoy learning.

4.6 Explaining next programs and assignments

Another function of code switching observed in both General and ESP classrooms was terminating each session when the instructors tended to switch to Persian for the sake of explaining the tasks students were required to do for the incoming session. The following is an example of an ESP class.

- (10)T : *Ok baraye jalase bad bayad matne dares jaded ro bekhunin, tamrnha ro hal konin va rooye mozoe matn fekr konin ta raje behesh sare kela bahs konim* (For next session you are supposed to read the next lesson, do the exercises and think about the topic of the passage to discuss it in the classroom.)
S : *ta che safheeye tamrin ha ro anjam bedim?* (How many pages are we supposed to cover for the assignment?)
T : *ta safheye 59* (up to page 59). *Lazem nist tamrine gramere safheye 60 ro anjam bedin* (you are not required to do the grammar exercise on page 60).

This example is concerned with the instructor's efforts to enhance the learners' perceptions of classroom activities. In this case, he ensures that students have been well informed of the next session assignments and would get ready for the given tasks.

5. The instructors' perceptions of code switching

After audio-taping the two classrooms, the instructors were interviewed simultaneously (in the form of focus groups) and questions regarding the nature of code switching and their perceptions were elicited. They both considered code switching as the crucial and influential part of Iranian EFL classrooms which aimed to facilitate the continuity of classroom interactions. Careful analysis of the interview revealed that several factors presumably prompt them to practice code switching in the classrooms.

The most important factor was students' level of English proficiency. The teachers both, specifically the General English instructor, believed that they tended to code switch from English to Persian whenever they faced low proficient students in their classrooms compared with intermediate and upper intermediate ones. The second important one was the degree of the difficulty of English materials. The more difficult the materials are, the more degree of code switching is required. Lack of any force or control in the way teachers practice teaching in their classrooms was also mentioned as a factor affecting the degree of code switching by the teachers in each class. They argued that since teachers are not forced to talk in English classes, they themselves may prefer to continuously code switch to Persian even when dealing with learners at intermediate levels of English proficiency. The other factors such as English instructors' age and proficiency level were regarded as marginal factors that may affect code switching in General and ESP courses. They

both emphasized the importance of using code switching as a teaching strategy especially at lower English proficiency levels to remove the obstacles which student faced in their efforts to communicate as well as to sustain the continuity of interaction.

Additionally, referring to almost subconscious nature of code switching, they argued that proper nouns and what the General English instructor called 'culture-bound' words, by which he meant those words specific to each language, are the words which may prompt him to switch to another language. Here is the excerpt from the interview with him.

Interviewer: Do you code switch at trigger words mentioned earlier?
General English instructor: I mainly code switch at proper nouns or words which are culture bound. I mean that there are some special words which are used only in Farsi and some of them are used only in English like for example if you are talking about different kinds of sweets for example kinds of cookies or something like that..um..like 'Gaz' that is only popular in Iran we have to shift to Farsi and then you might continue talking in Farsi.

6. Conclusion

This paper tried to consider code switching from a psycholinguistic perspective with regard to 'trigger words' introduced by Clyne (1991). The results of the two audio-taped EFL classrooms displayed the greater use of code switching in ESP context compared with the General English course. Moreover, the results of the study revealed the fact that among the four types of 'trigger words' just 'proper nouns' to a great extent and discourse marker 'OK' to a lesser extent were responsible for code switching in General English classroom while 'lexical transfer' and again discourse marker 'OK' caused code switch in ESP context. With regard to the results dealing with the functions code switching served during interactions in the EFL classrooms, six functions were determined. They include providing equivalents for the key words, explaining grammatical structures, highlighting some lexical elements of vocabulary, inspiring students, expressing humor, and explaining next programs and assignments.

The other findings of the study related to the instructors' perceptions of code switching indicated some significant factors that prompted EFL instructors to code-switch. The most significant factor was the students' low proficiency level followed by the difficulty level of the materials. The findings of the study suggest that code-switching plays an important role in English language teaching and learning for low proficient learners.

One possible implication of those findings is that code-switching practices are helpful in English language teaching and learning since English teachers benefit from its use. Another implication of those findings is that code-switching should be tolerated or even promoted in the teaching of students at lower levels of English proficiency. Moreover, one of the advantages for English teachers is the application of code-switching in maintaining the continuity of communication in EFL contexts.

From a psychological perspective, both EFL instructors felt comfortable and secure to switch from one language to another language when they were involved in the process of English language teaching. However, this study needs to be replicated with regard to teachers' perspectives on the use of code switching in other EFL contexts to see its implications by using a larger and varied corpus of teachers and universities.

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