Perception of EFL Learners towards Code Switching in ESP Contexts

Fariba Rahimi Esfahani

Islamic Azad University-Shahrekord Branch, Humanities Department, Faculty of Foreign Languages, Shahrekord, Iran.

ABSTRACT

Background: Code-switching is known to be a widespread phenomenon among bilinguals and in ESP classes; it refers to any alternate use of two codes or languages within the same conversation or even the same utterance. There have been contradictory views regarding the effect of code switching on second language acquisition, negative views and positive views. Objective: The present study is an attempt to investigate the students' attitudes towards code-switching in ESP contexts in Iran. It also reports the relationship between code switching and learners' learning success in an ESP context. To achieve this end, a total of fifty university students majoring in computer science were selected as respondents for this study. Respondents were required to complete a survey questionnaire by indicating their attitudes towards using code switching in the ESP contexts and the effect of code switching on the students' learning success.

Results: The data from the questionnaire were tabulated, and frequencies and percentages were conducted by SPSS program. The findings indicate that the majority of students have positive attitudes towards code switching. Students also believe that code switching has a facilitating effect on learning computer texts in English.

Conclusion: The findings of this research suggest that code switching is a necessary tool for teachers due to a number of pedagogical considerations in ESP lessons involving students who lack proficiency.

INTRODUCTION

Code-switching is generally defined as the shifting that occurs “between two or more languages simultaneously or interchangeably within one conversation” (Grosjean, 1982, p. 145). The linguistic behavior referred to code switching, code mixing, code-shifting or within a language, style shifting, according to David Crystal (2003), “involves the transfer of linguistic elements from one language into another: a sentence begins in one language, then makes use of words or grammatical features belonging to another” (pp. 78-79).

For many years, bilinguals in many societies and communities switched to L1/L2 to be capable of communicating with other bilinguals. Gardner-Chloros (2009, p. 4) describes CS as “the use of several languages and dialects in the same conversation or sentence by bilingual people.” She justifies that not only is CS occurred in language, but it is also used in dialects. In line with this definition, Niemiec (2010) affirms that CS is the alternation of language forms amongst bilinguals in speech and adds that CS may entail a word, phrase, clause or multiple sentences.

Sert (2005) states that there are two opposing sides on the issue of code switching in language classroom settings. On one side, there are the teachers who prefer to adhere to the formal rules of second language learning which compels students to speak only in the target language and practice communicative techniques in order to master the language well. However, language instructors who support bilingual instruction in the form of code-switching believe it to be extremely useful to students in many different aspects, especially in the teaching of beginner students (Sert, 2005).

Code switching in second or foreign language acquisition is a linguistic behavior for developing bilinguals in bilingual learning or multilingual contexts. Early studies about such subject were done in bilingual contexts in the United States, with the objective of investigating first the functions of code switching in the speaking of bilingual teachers and with which some languages, usually English or Spanish, were employed to perform different functions (Martin-Jones, 1995). According to Clyne (2000), code-switching is the alternative use of two languages either within a sentence or between sentences. Also, this contrasts with transference, where a
single item is transferred from languages A to B (or vice versa), whether integrated into the grammatical or phonological system of the recipient language or not.

In the mid 1990s, researchers focused on the way code-switching related to the interaction between teachers and learners in a bilingual classroom. Later, researchers examined the topics which were related to teachers' and learners’ use of code switching in an educational context. Recent studies carried out in monolingual foreign language classroom, have also shown that teachers and students use code switching when interacting with each other in educational context (Braga, 2000; Cipriani, 2001; Macaro, 2001; Moreira, 2001; Bergsleithner, 2002; cited in Jamshidi & Navehebrahim, 2013). The researchers observed that beginners use code switching as well as intermediate and advanced learners of English. In a study performed by Abosede-Adebiyi (2011), it has been insisted that teachers may switch to L1 for linguistic reasons such as explaining a term/phrase/clause or simply because it is more appropriate to use some terms in the first language.

Although a considerable amount of research has been conducted regarding the Iranian L2 teaching and learning, (Maghsoudi, 2008; Mirhasasi & Jafarpour-Mamaghani, 2009; Memenjan & Ghafar-Samar, 2011), most of this research is not concerned with ESP setting. However, this study seeks to investigate the ESL learners’ perception towards code switching in ESP classrooms and to find out the effect of teacher’s code switching on learner’s learning success.

**Background:**

The main reason why learners’ code-switching had not been exhaustively studied in the 1970s-1980s was the fact that learners were seldom allowed to code-switch freely, and “authentic” data are hard to get (Legenhausen1991). During those years, the traditional and stereotypical view of code switching was that it is a completely haphazard mixture of two languages (Legenhausen 1991). Traditionally, SLA has been considered as L2 acquisition in a more or less formal setting: the pronunciation of an L2, the grammar of the L2 etc. (Ellis, 2000; Gass & Selinker, 2001; de Bot, et al. 2005).

Simon (2001) raises the question of whether the methodology used for analyzing social code-switching is adequate in the classroom context. Code-switching can be used as part of an actual teaching methodology. When the teacher is aware of the language of the students, the classroom is a setting that potentially uses code switching. Code-switching is necessary in the classroom if the teacher and students share the same language and should be regarded as a natural part of bilingual’s behavior. Systematic investigation of learners’ code-switching are undertaken by Arnfast and Jorgensen (2003), which show how code-switching may develop into a bilingual competence among learners within the first year of intensive training.

Bilingual teachers use two languages to teach the academic content. Within the context of lessons, they switch between the languages in at least three ways: (a) spontaneously, (b) directly, (c) intentionally. Teachers may decide immediately when L1 should be used and when a switch to L2 is appropriate in order to enable comprehension and meaningful involvement of the students (Cook, 2001). However, teachers are unaware of the fact that they are switching; switches are made unconsciously.

In recent years many studies that have been carried out in educational contexts around the world in the field of code-switching, indicate that both teachers and learners use code-switching to communicate and interact in the foreign language classroom. (cipriani, 2001; Macaro.2001; Turnbull, 2002; Arnfast and Jorgensen, 2003; Melo. 2005; cited in Jamshidi & Navehebrahim, 2013).

Cook (2000) believed that to permit students use their mother tongue can be factor to help students improve the way they learn a second language and it provides students with opportunities to say what they tend to say in classrooms. (Levine , 2003) also argues that if the use of L1 is in the right way it will serves effective functions in L2 classrooms, such as, vocabulary, grammar, and writing assignments.

It was further emphasized by Ahmad and Yusoff (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 which leads to a better understanding of learning among learners as it provides learners with sufficient input to understand the L2.

In advertent to the positive views held on code-switching in ESL classrooms, some researchers, 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.
Thus, code-switching in second language classrooms can only be applied with due consideration from the teachers. In a study conducted by Macaro (1997), except a small group of females, most of the students preferred the use of L1 by the teachers in order for better understanding to occur. Even some students mentioned that they could not understand items without using the mother tongue. Macaro adds in his study to use strategies namely; interviews, class observations and surveys to come across the L1 and L2 use in the classrooms. He discovered that teachers may use code-switching to clear and clarify instructions in class tasks to give feedback to students and to ensure the students’ understanding.

Bergsleithner (2000), investigated a study on grammar and interaction in a pre-intermediate EFL classroom. The researcher stated that learners use code-switching to express themselves better during interaction and negotiation of the meaning and form.

Schweers (1999) conducted a research into the field of code-switching, and found that a high percentage (about 88.7) of the participants felt that the use of mother tongue in their English classes is effective. Also, if the learners try to ignore the use of mother tongue in English classes, their identities may be threatened.

Braga (2002), conducted a study on humor in a beginner EFL classroom. In the study, he indicated that participants use of code-switching was used as a strategy which signals humorous situations through correcting activities. In other words, code switching makes a comfortable atmosphere in the EFL classroom under investigation.

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.

As this brief literature review shows, code-switching carries out important functions in the communicative activities in L2 classrooms. Despite the various useful findings on code-switching in ESL and EFL classroom from different backgrounds, more can be learned about learners’ perception towards code switching in ESP contexts. With this in mind, this study aims to investigate the EFL learners’ perception towards code switching in ESP classrooms and to determine the relation between teacher’s code switching and learner’s learning success.

Significance and objective of the study:

Code-switching should not be considered as a sign of defect in the teacher. Instead, it is a careful strategy employed by the teachers. Code-switching should be allowed whenever necessary with some learners in specific situations. The literature review on code-switching indicates various positive and facilitating functions of code-switching approved by both the teachers and learners such as explaining new vocabulary, relaxing the learners, explaining grammar, talking about class tasks and assessments and establishing contact with learners. The present study aims to explore the EFL learners’ attitudes towards code-switching in ESP classroom to improve ESP teaching. Meanwhile it is hoped to raise ESP teachers’ awareness of using code-switching in classroom and facilitate their language choices in the interactive classroom activities by finding the relationship between code switching and learners’ learning success. The study is of significance. First, it may contribute to the study of code-switching in classroom teaching and complement and perfect the theory of code-switching. Second, it may motivate ESP teachers to reflect their ways of using language and adjust them to monitor their language choices in their practical teaching. Third, it may challenge the teaching concepts that pure target language input can achieve the perfect effect with no native language used. Lastly, the present study may offer ESP teachers and administrators suggestions to contribute to the ESP teachers’ development to maximize the roles that code-switching plays in ESP classroom.

The objectives of this research are:
1) to determine EFL learners perceptions of teachers’ code-switching in ESP contexts.
2) to determine the relationship between teachers’ code-switching and EFL learners’ learning success in ESP contexts.

Research design:

3.1. Research questions
This research seeks to answer the following questions:
Q1: What do EFL learners think about code switching in ESP contexts?
Q2. To what extent teacher’s code switching correlate with learners’ learning success?

Research Methodology:
The participants in this study were 50 university students majoring in Computer Science in Shahrekord Azad university, Iran. They were randomly chosen from 90 applicants who were taught Computer texts in English. The subjects were both male and female Persian speakers and ranged in age between 18 to 22 years. Primary data were collected using a survey questionnaire. The questionnaire, which comprised thirteen items was adapted from Lee (2010) and Ahmad (2009). Some new sections were also added to the questionnaire to make it more appropriate for the current study. The first part focused on learners’ attitudes toward code switching. Part B focused on the extent of learning success due to the use of code switching in the classroom. Each of the sections on Part B of the questionnaire required 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 analyzed using both descriptive statistics for the scores of mean, frequency, and percentage and inferential statistics for correlation measures.

Findings and Discussions:
Learners’ Attitude 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% (n=43) of the respondents agree that code switching should be used in the English language classrooms. The figure shows that only 7 out of the 50 respondents were against code switching when ESP context is concerned,

Table 1: Should teacher code switch while teaching a foreign language?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Valid</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percent</th>
<th>Valid Percent</th>
<th>Cumulative Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>no</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>14.0</td>
<td>14.0</td>
<td>14.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>yes</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>86.0</td>
<td>86.0</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td></td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2 shows that 92% (n=50) of the learners think code switching helps them learn in English language. Only four learners perceived it as not helping with learning. However, as to what extent it should be used, Table 3 shows 60% (n=30) chose sometimes, 18% (n=9) chose a lot of time, and 14% (n=7) chose always, while 6% (n=3) prefer it to be used rarely and 2% (n=1) chose never.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Valid</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percent</th>
<th>Valid Percent</th>
<th>Cumulative Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>no</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>8.0</td>
<td>8.0</td>
<td>8.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>yes</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>92.0</td>
<td>92.0</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td></td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The majority of learners indicated that code switching should be used in the English classroom 86% (n=43). 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 perceive code switching should be employed in foreign language classroom (Lee, 2010), 92% of the students of current research believe that code switching would help them learn the target language. 60% of them said that although it should be used and that it helps learning, code switching is to be used only sometimes or occasionally, 18% believed it should be used a lot of time and 14% thought it should be used always. This finding is in line with Jinxia (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 five items measure learners’ attitudes towards code switching, it can be concluded that EFL learners have a positive perception towards code switching while learning ESP contexts. They do code switch in times of need or when necessary.
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’ 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.

These findings reflect a study by Then and Ting (2009) who found that code switching is employed at various levels, from kindergarten to university level in Malaysia. This study shows that learners are exposed to code switching in the language classroom for reiteration and comprehension and its usage is purposeful.

The findings are also in line with Jakobsson & Rydén (2010) findings which showed the positive attitudes of both teachers and students toward code switching. The students in their study claimed that their teachers used code-switching when wanting order in the classroom and when explaining instructions again to those who did not understand when the instructions were given in the target language.

The current findings confirms the earlier study by Lee (2010) who found that the majority of teachers had positive attitudes towards code switching. They only used code switching in times of need. Participants in his study also believed that code switching had a role to play in facilitating second language learning.

The findings of this study also support Zabrodskaja’s findings (2007) that code-switching in the university classroom is both inevitable and necessary. It is not only a part of communicative resources of a bilingual repertoire but also an active part in the learning experience.

**Code switching and Learners’ Learning Success:**

The overall findings are shown in Table 4. Generally, the respondents perceived that code-switching has helped to ensure that they achieve their intended success due to a high percentage of ‘sometimes’, ‘a lot of time’, and ‘always’.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 4: Code switching and learners’ learning success</th>
<th>Never</th>
<th>Rarely</th>
<th>Sometimes</th>
<th>A lot of time</th>
<th>Always</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 It helps me to understand new words</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>22%</td>
<td>34%</td>
<td>33%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 It helps me to understand difficult concepts</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>19%</td>
<td>41%</td>
<td>29%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 It helps me to understand English grammar</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>28%</td>
<td>35%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 It helps me in learning the English language in the class</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>22%</td>
<td>27%</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 It helps me carry out the task successfully</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>28%</td>
<td>34%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 It helps me to differentiate between the use of firstlanguage(L1) and second language(L2) in speaking</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>22%</td>
<td>33%</td>
<td>32%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7 It helps me to clear doubts and uncertainties on subject matter</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>36%</td>
<td>32%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8 It helps me to overcome communication problems</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>27%</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>33%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9 It helps me to follow lessons better</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>31%</td>
<td>32%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10 It helps me to make an effort to speak in English with the teacher and peers</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>29%</td>
<td>30%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Of a total of 50 respondents, 89 percent of the respondents indicated that code-switching has helped them understand new words, 90 percent of the respondents perceived that code-switching has assisted them in understanding any difficult concepts contained in the lesson while nearly 83 percent of the respondents also perceived that teachers’ code-switching has helped them understand the grammar being taught. Some 74 percent of the respondents acknowledged that their teachers’ code-switching has assisted them in learning English in the classrooms and 82 percent of the respondents perceived that they were able to carry out any task assigned by the teachers when teachers code-switched.

Moreover, it has been observed that the learners perceive the importance of teachers’ code switching in helping them to differentiate between the use of L1 and L2 in speaking, to clear doubts and uncertainties on the subject matter, to overcome communication problems, to follow lessons better, and finally to make an effort to speak in English with the teacher and peers.
Students perceived that their learning success was also related to the teachers’ code-switching. The result of the analysis (Table 5) showed a significant relationship between teachers’ code-switching and learners’ learning success as indicated by the value of $r = 0.569$ thus indicating learners’ satisfaction towards their learning.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cumulative mean value</th>
<th>Pearson R</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Code-switching</td>
<td>29.566</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning Success</td>
<td>14.654</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 5: Correlation: Code Switching and Learning Success**

This justifies the novel role of code-switching in enhancing learners’ psychological state when attending their English lessons. Later, this would be translated into becoming more involved and responsible in their learning (Schweers, 1999; Chi, 2000; Mattioli, 2004). The anxiety-free classroom atmosphere encourages them to participate more actively in the classroom activities. Therefore, learning success requires successful provision of comprehensible input to ensure learners understand the intended content, covering new concepts, skills and vocabulary which would consequently translated into successful execution of tasks (Schweers, 1999; Chi, 2000; Tang, 2002).

The findings of this study support those of Ayeomoni (2006) who found that code-switching and code-mixing correlated positively with the educational attainment of individuals.

The results of this study are also in line with Rahimi Esfahani’s findings (2010) which indicated that code-switching had a positive effect on the students’ reading comprehension ability, since the students in the experimental group performed better than those in the control group on the task.

The results of this study run counter to the methods such as the Direct Method and the Audio-lingual Method. In these methods, the native language should not be used in the classroom. The proponent of this idea believed that code-switching should be avoided in language learning situations because it would prevent the improvement of L1.

In summary, learning success reflects the learners’ ability to use English effectively as a result of learners’ understanding of teachers’ input generated through learners’ successful completion of tasks or activities designed by teachers. An English Only classroom, therefore, cannot always ensure comprehensible input. Hence, code-switching by the teacher should be considered a form of teaching strategy. This form of classroom instructions fulfills the communicative aspects of the syllabus and teaching approach, by way of achieving the transfer of meaning as desired by the teaching (Skiba, 1997; Cook, 2001; Sert, 2005).

**Conclusion:**

The present study has studied teachers’ code-switching in ESP classrooms. The findings indicated that most students had positive attitude to the teacher’s code-switching in ESP contexts. First, students like the teacher to use L1 in 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. It is also evident in this research that these learners 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. The results of this study also show that teachers’ code-switching is significantly associated with learners’ learning success. This implies that careful and judicious use of code-switching can facilitate learners’ learning process and lead to appropriate successful teaching and learning of English in ESP contexts. 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 in ESP classroom is not always a deficiency in language learning, but may be considered as a kind of useful strategy in learning a language.

**REFERENCES**


