

Code-switching on the Part of Saudi English Teachers in Foreign Language Classrooms

By

Dr. Merzin Alshahrani

**Faculty of Languages & Translation,
King Khalid University,
Abha, Saudi Arabia**

E-mail: mralshahrani@kku.edu.sa

Abstract

Code-switching is a remarkable phenomenon in the field of sociolinguistics. By using a mixed-methodology, this study sought to investigate the reasons for, and functions of code-switching performed by two native Arabic speaking teachers who teach English as a foreign language at King Khalid University, Saudi Arabia. The two teachers were observed and their English classes were recorded. Then, the data from these observations, as well as from a questionnaire and interviews, were transcribed and analyzed based on the functions of their code-switching. The findings showed that both teachers engaged in code-switching despite the claim that it is not a proper practice in teaching English. Their code-switching in English classrooms served various functions: topic switching, affective functions, repetitive purposes, and addressing particular cultural aspects of Islam. In addition, the data indicated that students' weak proficiency in English, the teachers' negative attitudes about English, and emotional expressions determined the number of occurrences of code-switching in their classrooms. Based on these findings, some pedagogical recommendations are provided for English teachers in Saudi Arabia to enrich their awareness of code-switching as a significant tool in teaching foreign languages.

Keywords: Code- Switching, Saudi teachers, Bilingualism, English Teaching, Foreign Language

التناوب اللغوي لدى معلمي اللغة الإنجليزية في فصول تعلم اللغات الأجنبية في المملكة العربية السعودية

إعداد

د. مرزن الشهراني
جامعة الملك خالد

المخلص

التناوب اللغوي ظاهرة مميزة تسترعي البحث في حقل اللغويات الاجتماعية. وقد هدفت الدراسة مستخدمة أسلوب تثلث البيانات إلى استقصاء أسباب ووظائف التناوب اللغوي من قبل اثنين من معلمي اللغة الإنجليزية الناطقين بالعربية في جامعة الملك خالد بالمملكة العربية السعودية. قام الباحث بملاحظة المعلمين، وتسجيل بعض محاضراتهما، ثم قام بجمع المشاهدات ونتائج استبانة ومقابلات شخصية أجريت معها، كما قام الباحث بتفريغ وتحليل البيانات للتعرف على وظائف التناوب اللغوي. أظهرت النتائج أن كلا المعلمين كانا يقومان بالتناوب بين الإنجليزية والعربية أثناء الشرح والتدريس رغم ما يقال إن التناوب اللغوي ليس بالممارسة التدريسية الملائمة عند تعليم اللغة الإنجليزية. وقد عمل التناوب اللغوي في فصول اللغة الإنجليزية بتسهيل بعض الوظائف ومنها تغيير الموضوعات ووظائف وجدانية ولأغراض التكرار ولتناول بعض القضايا الثقافية الإسلامية. وقد بينت نتائج الدراسة كذلك ضعف الطلاب في كفاياتهم اللغوية، وسلبية اتجاهات المعلمين نحو اللغة الإنجليزية والتعبير الوجدانية التي تحدد عدد مرات التناوب اللغوي في فصول التعلم اللغوي. وعليه، فقد وضع الباحث بعض التوصيات الخاصة بتعليم اللغة لدى معلمي اللغة الإنجليزية لإثراء وعيهم بالتناوب اللغوي كأداة مهمة من أدوات تدريس اللغات الأجنبية.

الكلمات المفتاحية: التناوب اللغوي، معلمي اللغة الإنجليزية السعوديون، اللغة الأجنبية.

1- Introduction

Code-switching has prompted considerable research in the bilingual and multilingual communities during the past several decades. Myers-Scotten (1993) stated that interest in code-switching began in 1972. Gardener-Chloros (1991) defined code-switching as “the use of two or more languages in the same conversation or utterance” (p.136). Gumperz (1982), a pioneer researcher in code-switching, classified it into two categories: conversational and situational. Conversational code-switching occurs when speakers are motivated by various factors when speaking, while situational code-switching occurs depending on context, such as at school or work. Based on Gumperz’ categorization, classroom code-switching is most likely to be an example of situational code-switching. Many studies have been conducted in various contexts with different languages to investigate types of code-switching, its social effects, and its functions (Gumperz, 1982; Abalhassan & Alshalawi, 2000; Holmes, 2000; Auer, 2002; Al-Khatib, 2003; Woolard, 2004; Muthusamy, 2009; Nerghes, 2011; Ibrahim et al., 2013). While a great deal of research has been conducted to examine the functions of code-switching in the FL classroom context, almost no studies have investigated the use of code-switching by Saudi EFL university teachers. Thus, this study examined the reasons for, and functions of code-

switching performed by two teachers who were native speakers of Arabic while teaching English as a foreign language in King Khalid University in Saudi Arabia, and their attitudes about using code-switching in teaching English.

1.1. Objective of the Study

This study was designed to investigate Saudi EFL teachers’ use of code-switching in FL classrooms.

1.2. Research Questions

The study addressed the following research questions:

- 1- What are EFL teachers’ attitudes about using code-switching in teaching English as a FL?
- 2- What are the functions of EFL teachers’ code-switching in EFL classrooms?

1.3. Study Context

In the context of this study (Saudi Arabia), where English is taught as a foreign language, the Saudi Education policy states that English should be the language of instruction and teachers are not allowed to use Arabic (L1). This decision was made to maximize the degree of exposure to the target language to increase students’ proficiency in English. While this argument is reasonable, the Saudi context is a

predominantly Arabic speaking country and English is used primarily by teachers and students only inside the classroom, and those teachers code-switch between Arabic and English in their daily classes. Thus, this study investigated the reasons why they use code-switching in this EFL context.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Types of code-switching

Many previous studies have investigated types of code-switching (Milroy & Muysken; 1995; Farida, 2010; Jingxia, 2010; Krishna, 2010). Gumperz conducted the most in-depth study of code-switching in 1982. He sub-categorized code-switching into *conversational* and *situational code-switching*. He defined conversational code-switching as the juxtaposition within the same speech exchange of passages of speech belonging to two different grammatical systems or subsystems. This type of code-switching tends to occur subconsciously as the speakers are motivated by factors within the conversation itself as it takes place. In contrast, situational code-switching involves changes in language choice because of the speaker's environment. Situational code-switching might occur at school, work, or in public gatherings where the situation demands formal use of language. In light of Gumperz' (1982) classification, classroom code-switching would be considered situational. Merrit et al. (1992) argued that choosing the language of instruction is necessarily more complex than can be legislated by language policy. Although this policy asserts that English teachers should use

only English in teaching, actual classroom practice may differ. Teachers might code-switch to the native language for various reasons and functions. Hence, code-switching in this particular study referred to teachers' alternative use of English and Arabic within English classes.

2.2 Teachers' attitudes about using code-switching

Code-switching is a common phenomenon in foreign language classrooms. Many researchers have argued that code-switching can be a significant element in developing English language teaching and the learning process (Lai, 1996; Cole, 1998; Critchley, 1999; Schweers, 1999; Burden, 2001; Tang, 2002; Greggio & Gil, 2007). In addition, Qing (2002) suggested that code-switching is a beneficial tool that serves functions that may enrich the language-learning environment. In his study of Spanish students in EFL classrooms, Schweers (1999) found that the majority of teachers encouraged code-switching in their classes. The participants also claimed that code-switching is time consuming, and therefore allows them more time to practice English and engage in more activities.

Cook (2002) claimed that two conditions should be considered when language teachers use code-switching. First, code-switching should be avoided in multilingual classrooms, as it can lead to misunderstanding and confusion because the students do not share the same language. Second, the teachers' competence in teaching L1 must be considered when affective code-switching is expected.

Code-switching should be limited to students with low levels of English proficiency and used only to clarify a word's meaning or explain grammar; it should not be used when students are highly proficient.

In contrast, in the FL context in which students are exposed to English only in the classroom, code-switching may have a negative effect on their communication with native speakers. This argument was supported by Eldridge(1996) and Sert (2005), who claimed that teachers' continual use of code-switching in translation instruction eventually prevents students from becoming autonomous learners.

2.3. Reasons for code-switching أسباب

Some studies have identified various reasons or functions of code-switching (Suleiman, 2000; Holmes, 2000; Auer, 2002; Al-Khatib, 2003; Alsbai, 2010; Abdel Tawwab, 2014). For example, Abdel Tawwab (2014) claimed that speakers may switch from one language to another for various reasons: to show solidarity with a social group or participate in social encounters, to distinguish themselves, to discuss a certain topic, to express emotions, or to persuade their audience. Furthermore, code-switching can be used to show solidarity among people from different or the same ethnic groups. As Holmes (2000) indicated, "A speaker may switch to another language as a signal of group membership and shared ethnicity within an addressee." According to Al-Khatib (2003), speakers may code-switch to reflect their social class. In addition, Alsbai (2010) investigated code-switching between English and Arabic in the utterance

construction level and showed that the speakers considered code-switching a sign of prestige and civility.

2.4. The functions of EFL teachers' code-switching

While teaching foreign languages, many teachers switch from one language to another or from one dialect to another, either intentionally or unintentionally. These kinds of code-switching serve certain functions beneficial in teaching and learning FL. In a comprehensive study, Mattson and Burenhults Mattson (1999) determined three main functions of code-switching: topic shift, and affective and repetitive functions. These functions are the primary focus of this study, and are explained in more detail below.

2.4.1. Topic Shift أسباب

Several researchers have claimed that topic plays a significant role in code-switching (Abal Hassan & Al Shalawi, 2000; Holmes, 2000; Reyesm 2004; Leung, 2006). For example, Bensen and Çavuşoğlu (2014) found that teachers shift to the mother tongue of their students to increase their understanding of the new language. These results are consistent with those of Krashen (2013), who evaluated the factors that affect code-switching among 15 bilingual university students. The findings revealed that the major factor in code-switching was to convey the meaning accurately.

Some researchers have claimed that using students' previous experience with, or rules in their mother tongue while presenting a new topic or clarifying instructions will increase their understanding of the new language

(Auerbach, 1993; Cole, 1998). Ibrahim et al.'s (2013) work supported this claim, as the teachers in his study switched the topic from the target language (English) to the students' mother tongue (Malay) to explain grammatical rules.

2.4.2. Affective Functions

Teachers tend to express certain emotions and attitudes in another language. Bensen and Çavuşoğlu (2014) investigated the reasons that teachers code-switched in adult EFL classrooms in North Cyprus, and reported that they did so to foster a supportive language environment in the classroom. Al-Khatib (2003) also indicated that speakers might change their language to express a variety of emotions. According to Gumperz (1982), teachers use code-switching to share the students' emotions, create a soft atmosphere, and narrow the gap between teachers and students. Some previous studies have recommended code-switching for affective purposes (Auebach,1993; Cook, 2001; Hughes et al., 2006). Auerbach (1993) claimed that code-switching is a supportive tool to increase language proficiency in English and stated that it "...reduces anxiety and enhance[s] the affective environment for learning, takes into account social factors, facilitates incorporation of learners' life experiences and allow[s] for learner-centered curriculum development" (p. 20).

2.4.3. Repetitive Functions

Previous studies have demonstrated that code-switching maybe employed in circumstances where there is a lack of one word in either language. Therefore, teachers use code-switching to clarify the

meaning of words or concepts. Furthermore, teachers use code-switching to introduce the meaning of new concepts (Gumperz, 1982; Karen, 2003; Kasperczyk, 2005;Tien & Liu, 2006).Qing (2010) found that teachers in her study translated or elaborated important points while explaining new vocabulary or grammar rules. Gumperz (1982) pointed out that code-switching enables teachers to convey precise meanings that maximize learning. Consistent with his study, Auerbach (1993) identified the following reasons for code-switching: classroom management, explaining grammar, giving instructions and checking comprehension, and for cultural purposes. The results of Walt's (2008) study of the functions of code-switching in English classes in schools in the Western Cape found that teachers translated classroom instructions into Afrikaans to ensure that they were understood well.

3. Methods

3.1. Participants

Two Saudi English teachers were selected randomly to participate in this study. Both are members of the teaching faculty in the university's English Department.

3.2. Background of the Participants

Subject 1 is a 37-year-old male Saudi teacher whose mother tongue is Arabic. He holds a Ph.D.in Applied Linguistics and has20 years of experience teaching EFL.

Subject 2is a 40-year-old Saudi English teacher. He obtained his MA degree in teaching ESL. He is proficient in English and has 15 years of teaching experience.

He has also attended various courses and workshops on teaching English.

3.3. Data collection

After a detailed explanation of the purpose of the study, the two teachers were asked to respond to demographic questions about their age, years of teaching experience, education, and level of English proficiency.

Thereafter, the researcher observed each participant for two hours while they taught English in their classrooms. The classes were audio recorded, and notes were taken on their use of code-switching. This method was used to observe participants' code-switching behavior and discuss it with them later.

After classroom observations, each participant was interviewed for approximately 30 minutes to assess his attitudes about code-switching and his reasons for using it while teaching English. A playback method (Harris, 2006) was used in this study. The recordings were replayed, and the teachers were asked to provide reasons why they used code-switching. Thereafter, the interviews were coded according to the code-switching functions. Finally, the observational data and interviews were transcribed and analyzed to answer the research questions.

4. Results and Discussion

Question 1: What are the EFL teachers' attitudes about using code-switching in teaching English as a FL?

Code-switching in this study entailed shifting between Arabic as the mother tongue and English as the target language in English classes. The interview findings showed that both

participants expressed positive attitudes about code-switching, and believe that it is beneficial in the language teaching process. They considered it a supportive and facilitative tool in language acquisition. The teachers' attitudes can be summarized as follows. First, they believe that using code-switching in teaching English in the Saudi context is inevitable, particularly with students with low proficiency. Second, the participants agreed that code-switching is time consuming, especially when teaching abstract new vocabulary or giving instructions, and allows time to engage in more English practice or to teach new materials. These positive attitudes are supported by the majority of code-switching studies (Lai, 1996; Cole, 1998; Critchley, 1999; Schweers, 1999; Burden, 2001; Tang, 2002; Greggio & Gil, 2007; Qing, 2010). The participants' views also were consistent with Cook's (2002) suggestion that code-switching should not be employed with highly proficient students.

Question 2: Functions of teachers' code-switching

The analyses of the classroom observations revealed that both participants code-switched during their English classes. They shifted to the mother tongue 72 times in total (40 and 32, respectively) for various purposes, such as topic shift, affective functions, repetitive purposes, and cultural aspects of Islam (Table 1). These findings are consistent with Mattsson and Burenhult Mattsson (1990). Interestingly, both participants code-switched almost the same number of times (40 for Teacher 1 and 32 for Teacher, 2) and shared the same code-switching functions.

Table 1. Frequency and Functions of code-switching

Participants	Frequency of use code-switching	Functions of code-switching				
		Topic switch grammar	Affective functions	Giving instructions	Explain new vocabulary	Cultural aspects of Islam
Teacher 1	40	8	8	6	9	9
Teacher 2	32	5	4	5	8	10
Total	72	14	12	11	17	19

Topic switch (grammar)

In this study, the teachers tended to give instructions in Arabic to ensure that students understood the meaning clearly. As shown in Table 1 above, both teachers code-switched to the native language while teaching certain grammatical rules, such as active and passive voice, and used the students' previous knowledge of Arabic to explain grammar points in the target language.

Example

Ahmad eats and an apple.

Ahmad akal altufaha

An apple was eaten by Ahmad.

Altufaha aklaha Ahmad

These findings are consistent with previous studies that showed that teachers might shift from one language to the other when introducing the target language to benefit from the students' previous experience in L2 (Holmes, 2000; Reyes, 2004; Leung, 2006; Abal Hassan & Al Shalawi, 2000; Bensen & Çavuşoğlu, 2014).

Affective functions

Both participants code-switched for various affective purposes, e.g., greeting, narrowing the gap between teachers and

students, making jokes, displaying anger, motivating students, and decreasing their language anxiety. In addition, they used some Islamic phrases, such as *Jazak Allah Kahir* (May Allah reward you), to encourage students to participate in classroom discussions and to create a friendly atmosphere in the classroom.

In our EFL context, students studied English largely to pass the exam rather than to communicate with target language speakers. In this case, according to Teacher 1, code-switching serves to increase students' motivation, and enhances learning so that they achieve better exams results.

Examples:

- 1- Greeting: At the beginning of the class, the teachers greet students with the Arabic phrase, **Sabah alkhair** (*Good morning*)
- 2- Praising students: After providing a correct answer, the teachers say **Mumataz** (*Excellent*) to encourage the students to participate.
- 3- Encouraging students: teachers tend to tell students **Barak Allah feek** (*God bless you*) after they provide correct answers.

Reparative Functions (explaining new vocabulary, giving instructions)

Based on these data, it seems that teachers use code-switching when they introduce new vocabulary, especially those with no equivalents in Arabic or abstract words related to cultural.

Example:

The teachers translated some words into Arabic such as *veils*, *anxious*, and *shrine*.

The teachers tended to give instruction in English, then repeated it in Arabic to ensure the students comprehended the instructions clearly.

Cultural aspects of Islam

Table 1 shows that using code-switching for specific aspects of Islam is used most frequently. Saudi culture is based on Islamic traditions and most people are religious and respect Islamic teaching and terms greatly in their daily life. As a part of Saudi society, English classes are affected by this notion. In this study, both teachers used Islamic words excessively for various reasons: no equivalent in English, to show solidarity, and as an act of worship. In Islamic teachings, Muslims believe that Allah will reward them for uttering various words or phrases, such as *Alhadu lillah*, *Jazak Allah Khair*, and *bis Allah*. Ibrahim et al. (2013) found the same because of the similarity between the two Islamic contexts (Saudi Arabia and Malaysia).

5. Conclusions

This study investigated EFL teachers' use of code-switching while teaching English as a FL at KCU in Saudi Arabia. The findings showed that both teachers employed code-switching, despite the claim that it is not a proper practice in

teaching English. Code-switching serves various functions in English classrooms: topic switching, affective functions, repetitive purposes, and to address certain cultural aspects of Islam. In addition, the interviews showed that lack of proficiency in English, and emotional expressions affect the occurrence of code-switching in foreign language classrooms. These findings suggest some pedagogical recommendations for English teachers: to increase their awareness of code-switching as a significant sociolinguistics phenomenon, they should achieve a balance between using English (L2) and Arabic (L1) in their classrooms. As Swain and Lapkin (2000) recommended highly, "The use of L1 should not be prohibited in immersion classrooms, but neither should it be actively encouraged as it may substitute for, rather than support, second language learning"(p. 268).

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