

# The Functions of Code Switching in ELT Classrooms

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Code switching is a widely observed phenomenon especially seen in multilingual and multicultural communities. In ELT classrooms, code switching comes into use either in the teachers' or the students' discourse. Although it is not favoured by many educators, one should have at least an understanding of the functions of switching between the native language and the foreign language and its underlying reasons. This understanding will provide language teachers with a heightened awareness of its use in classroom discourse and will obviously lead to betterment of instruction by either eliminating it or dominating its use during the foreign language instruction.

## Introduction

Alternation between languages in the form of code switching is a widely observed phenomenon in foreign language classrooms. Numan and Carter briefly define the term as "a phenomenon of switching from one language to another in the same discourse" (2001:275). Following this definition, "*discourse*" will be handled as the students' and teachers' *naturally occurring language use* in classroom settings throughout this paper. Additionally, the languages between which alternation is performed are *the native language* of the students, and the foreign language that students are expected to gain competence in.

While putting the phenomenon of code switching in context, the functions of code switching will be introduced in various aspects. Firstly, its function in bilingual community settings will briefly be explained by giving a sample authentic conversation which will help the reader deduce ideas about its possible applications in educational contexts. Secondly, the functionality of code switching in teachers' classroom discourse will be introduced with its aspects as: topic switch, affective functions, and repetitive functions. Thirdly, the focus will shift to students' code switching by introducing some basic functional perspectives as: equivalence, floor holding, reiteration, and conflict control. Lastly, weak and strong sides of code switching in foreign language classrooms will be discussed with a critical approach.

## Code Switching in a Bilingual Community Context

Before considering the functions of code switching from the teachers' and the students' perspective, it would be appropriate to deal with the use of code switching in its naturally

occurring context; in other terms its functions in the discourse of bilingual individuals. According to Trudgill, “speakers switch to manipulate or influence or define the situation as they wish, and to convey nuances of meaning and personal intention” (2000:105). Drawing upon this quotation, it may be suggested that code switching can be used for self expression and is a way of modifying language for the sake of personal intentions.

Another function of code switching is that it may be used in order to build intimate interpersonal relationships among members of a bilingual community. In this respect, it may be claimed that it is a tool for creating linguistic solidarity especially between individuals who share the same ethno-cultural identity. In order to clarify the subject, the following dialogue which is observed and transcribed by Holmes may be given (1992:275):

(The Maori is in italics. THE TRANSLATION IS IN CAPITALS)

Sarah: I think everyone’s here except Mere.

John: She said she might be a bit late but actually I think that’s her arriving now.

Sarah: You’re right. *Kia ora Mere. Haere mai. Kei te pehea koe?*

(HI MERE. COME IN. HOW ARE YOU?)

Mere: *Kia ora hoa. Kei te pai.* Have you started yet?

(HELLO MY FRIEND. I AM FINE)

Following this example, it is observed that Sarah and Mere code switch from English to Maori during their conversation. The language shift these people perform reflects their ethnic identity and functions as a bridge that builds solidarity among them, which is also related to the high intimacy level concerning their relationship.

These functions of code switching in natural contexts mentioned above may have commonalities with its observable applications in foreign language classrooms. In dealing with these functions, teachers’ perspectives and students’ perspectives will be handled separately in order to reflect a wide ranging understanding of the phenomenon in educational settings. In building relations between “the use and functions of code switching in authentic contexts” and “the use and functions of code switching in foreign language classrooms”, it should be kept in mind that a language classroom is a social group; therefore a phenomenon related to naturally occurring daily discourse of any social group has the potential to be applicable to and valid for any language classroom.

## **The Functions of Teachers’ Code Switching**

The teachers’ use of code switching is not always performed consciously; which means that the teacher is not always aware of the functions and outcomes of the code switching process. Therefore, in some cases it may be regarded as an automatic and unconscious behaviour. Nevertheless, either conscious or not, it necessarily serves some basic functions which may be beneficial in language learning environments. These functions are listed as topic switch, affective functions, and repetitive functions by Mattson and Burenhult (1999:61). In order to have a general idea about these, it will be appropriate to give a brief

explanation about each function.

In topic switch cases, the teacher alters his/her language according to the topic that is under discussion. This is mostly observed in grammar instruction, that the teacher shifts his language to the mother tongue of his students in dealing with particular grammar points, which are taught at that moment. In these cases, the students' attention is directed to the new knowledge by making use of code switching and accordingly making use of native tongue. At this point it may be suggested that a bridge from known (native language) to unknown (new foreign language content) is constructed in order to transfer the new content and meaning is made clear in this way as it is also suggested by Cole (1998): "a teacher can exploit students' previous L1 learning experience to increase their understanding of L2".

In addition to the function of code switching named as topic switch, the phenomenon also carries affective functions that serve for expression of emotions. In this respect, code switching is used by the teacher in order to build solidarity and intimate relations with the students. In this sense, one may speak off the contribution of code switching for creating a supportive language environment in the classroom. As mentioned before, this is not always a conscious process on the part of the teacher. However, one may also infer the same thing for the natural occurrence of code switching as one can not take into guarantee its conscious application if the Maori example given in section II is considered.

Another explanation for the functionality of code switching in classroom settings is its repetitive function. In this case, the teacher uses code switching in order to transfer the necessary knowledge for the students for clarity. Following the instruction in target language, the teacher code switches to native language in order to clarify meaning, and in this way stresses importance on the foreign language content for efficient comprehension. However, the tendency to repeat the instruction in native language may lead to some undesired student behaviours. A learner who is sure that the instruction in foreign language will be followed by a native language translation may loose interest in listening to the former instruction which will have negative academic consequences; as the student is exposed to foreign language discourse limitedly.

## **The Functions of Students' Code Switching**

As it is the case for teachers' code switching, the students also are not always aware of the reasons for code switching as well as its functions and outcomes. Although they may unconsciously perform code switching, it clearly serves some functions either beneficial or not. Eldridge names these functions as: equivalence, floor-holding, reiteration, and conflict control (1996:305-307).

The first function of student code switch is equivalence. In this case, the student makes use of the native equivalent of a certain lexical item in target language and therefore code switches to his/her native tongue. This process may be correlated with the deficiency in linguistic competence of target language, which makes the student use the native lexical

item when he/she has not the competence for using the target language explanation for a particular lexical item. So “equivalence” functions as a defensive mechanism for students as it gives the student the opportunity to continue communication by bridging the gaps resulting from foreign language incompetence.

The next function to be introduced is floor-holding. During a conversation in the target language, the students fill the stopgap with native language use. It may be suggested that this is a mechanism used by the students in order to avoid gaps in communication, which may result from the lack of fluency in target language. The learners performing code switching for floor holding generally have the same problem: they can not recall the appropriate target language structure or lexicon. It may be claimed that this type of language alternation may have negative effects on learning a foreign language; since it may result in loss of fluency in long term.

The third consideration in students’ code switching is reiteration, which is pointed by Eldridge as: “messages are reinforced, emphasized, or clarified where the message has already been transmitted in one code, but not understood” (1996:306). In this case, the message in target language is repeated by the student in native tongue through which the learner tries to give the meaning by making use of a repetition technique. The reason for this specific language alternation case may be two-folds: first, he/she may not have transferred the meaning exactly in target language. Second, the student may think that it is more appropriate to code switch in order to indicate the teacher that the content is clearly understood by him/her.

The last function of students’ code switching to be introduced here is conflict control. For the potentially conflictive language use of a student (meaning that the student tends to avoid a misunderstanding or tends to utter words indirectly for specific purposes), the code switching is a strategy to transfer the intended meaning. The underlying reasons for the tendency to use this type of code switching may vary according to students’ needs, intentions or purposes. Additionally, the lack of some culturally equivalent lexis among the native language and target language--which may lead to violation of the transference of intended meaning--may result in code switching for conflict control; therefore possible misunderstandings are avoided.

## **A Discussion on the Use of Code switching in Language Classrooms**

Many teachers, who are in favour of the applications of communicative techniques in the language teaching environment, oppose any form of native language use during classroom instruction. Contrary to this, supporters of the use of native language in the form of code switching, suggest that it may be an effective strategy in various aspects. Following the ideas of these two parties, some weak and strong sides of the use of code switching in foreign language classroom settings will be mentioned with a critical perspective.

Cook (2002:333) handles the subject matter considering multilingual classrooms in saying that the application of code switching in classes which do not share the same native language may create problems, as some of the students (though few in number) will somehow be neglected. So, at this point it may be suggested that the students should share the same native language, if code switching will be applied in instruction. Another point to consider in this respect is that the competence of the teacher in mother tongue of students also plays a vital role, if positive contributions of code switching are expected. A further discussion is put forward by Eldridge, as he suggests “the learners have no guarantee that their audience will share knowledge of their mother tongue” (1996:309). This perspective concerns the interaction of students with native speakers of the target language, as mutual intelligibility may not be possible if the learner switches his language during communication.

In supporting the existence of code switching in language classrooms, Skiba (1997) suggests that in the circumstances where code switching is used due to an inability of expression, it serves for continuity in speech instead of presenting interference in language. In this respect, code switching stands to be a supporting element in communication of information and in social interaction; therefore serves for communicative purposes in the way that it is used as a tool for transference of meaning. Additionally, the functions of the teacher’s code switching as mentioned in III stand as supportive explanations for the strong sides of the phenomenon. All these in general lead to the idea that the use of code switching somehow builds a bridge from known to unknown and may be considered as an important element in language teaching when used efficiently.

## **Conclusion**

Throughout the paper, the functions of code switching in foreign language classrooms are presented with reference to its uses in bilingual communities. Following the functions of students’ and teachers’ code switching, weak and strong sides are discussed in order to clarify the phenomenon with different perspectives.

With respect to all points mentioned above, it may be suggested that code switching in language classroom is not always a blockage or deficiency in learning a language, but may be considered as a useful strategy in classroom interaction, if the aim is to make meaning clear and to transfer the knowledge to students in an efficient way. Yet, it should be kept in mind that in long term, when the students experience interaction with the native speakers of the target language; code switching may be a barrier which prevents mutual intelligibility. Accordingly, the teacher has a vital role for preventing its long-term damages on foreign language learning process.

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