Investigating Teachers' Use of Code-Switching for Low-Proficiency Students in ESL Language Classrooms: From the Lens of the Students

Aiman Hanani Shahidan, Syahreena Mohd Shahrom

Faculty of Education, Universiti Teknologi MARA, UiTM Cawangan Selangor, Kampus Puncak Alam, Selangor, Malaysia

Abstract

This study aimed to identify the low-proficiency students' perceptions towards the use of code-switching in ESL language classrooms. 65 low-proficiency students from SMK Seksyen 7 in Shah Alam, Selangor participated in this study. This study employs a quantitative research design. The data were collected through the 24-item adapted questionnaire. Then, the frequency analysis via IBM SPSS Statistics Version 26 was performed to examine the students' responses. The finding revealed that the practice of code-switching is widely used by teachers to explain the meaning of words to their students, while students had positively viewed the use of code-switching in ESL learning where code-switching was believed to be a beneficial tool during the lessons. Therefore, the finding may be useful to enlighten policymakers, teachers, and researchers on the issues that are related to the use of code-switching in ESL classrooms.

Keywords: Code-Switching, ESL Language Classrooms, Proficiency, Perception, Motivation

Introduction

The term 'code-switching' is the practice of concurrently switching between two languages (Nordquist, 2019). In an ESL context, the practice would often occur in the productive skills (speaking and writing) more than the receptive skills (reading and listening) of the speakers. That said, code-switching is most likely practiced by bilingual speakers. In the past, code-switching in the sociolinguistic field was a prominent focus of scientific research, and it has recently again risen in popularity. It has become a significant subject to study, particularly its use in society and education. Code-switching is deemed inevitable since it is inextricably linked to the linguistic variety in a group of individuals that mixes the language to produce a language that they can comprehend. For instance, when a speaker that speaks language A communicates with the speaker that speaks language B, both parties will inevitably develop code-switching in their speech. Depending on the angle from which each researcher approached their research, code flipping has been defined in various ways. According to Brown (2000:67), code-switching is incorporating words, sentences, or even longer sections of one language into the other. Adding to that, Valdes-Fallis (in Magid and Mugaddam, 2013) concluded that code-switching is the switching between two languages at the word, phrase, clause, and sentence levels. Additionally, code flipping was defined by Gumperz (in Gulzar,

2010) as the juxtaposition of speech passages from two separate grammar systems or sub-systems within the same speech exchange. Meanwhile, according to Skiba (in Moghadam et al., 2012), code-switching is the communicative exchange between speakers of two different language codes. Simply put, code-switching is the transition from one language to another during a spoken phrase. It is seen as the alternate use of the first language and the target language in the world of communication in the setting of an ESL classroom.

Teachers frequently integrate the two languages during teaching and learning, especially in ESL classrooms. During the lesson, they substitute words, phrases, or sentences from the native language for those in the target language. They do it as an alternative way to speak two or more languages. Code-switching is the process of moving or introducing words, phrases, or sentences from one language into another. As Mahootian (2006: 511) described, code-switching is a linguistic phenomenon that frequently occurs in bilingual and multilingual speech groups. It could consist of only one word, phrase, or multiple words. In foreign language classes, code-switching, or the switching between languages, is a common occurrence. Further research in all sectors and domains is required because code-switching has become an intriguing topic. According to Zentella (1985), speakers may use code-switching to 'mask' their fluency or memory issues in their second language. This is most likely to happen when a speaker is speaking in his second language and unexpectedly fails to recall certain words in the middle of the speech, which results him switching the speech to the native language to continue the conversation. This scenario is not a strange occurrence. Instead, it could be witnessed in almost every ESL classroom when the teachers or students spontaneously utilize it, especially among the low proficiency learners. Using The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) as an indicator of student's proficiency level, low-proficiency students would be designated in the A1 and A2 of CEFR's level. A1 and A2 learners are categorized as young learners who can communicate in basic daily conversation. For instance, asking for what they want in a foreign grocery shop. In Malaysia, these learners are comprised not only of young learners but also of young adults, usually incorporated from 17 to 25 years old.

Problem Statement

Reexamining the existing studies on the teachers' and students' belief towards the use of code-switching in the ESL classroom, the majority of the studies concluded that the subjects perceived that the practice of code-switching provided them with a more meaningful and comprehensible lesson compared to the lesson with the full English as a medium of communication. As mentioned in Ab Razak & M. Shah's (2020) study on the student's belief in the use of code-switching in the ESL classroom, the findings showed that the students perceived the lesson with the code-switching as more enjoyable and comprehensible as well as encouraging their motivation and confidence in learning English as a second language. In agreement with that, the findings of the study conducted by Ja'afar & Maarof (2016) on teachers' belief of code-switching in the ESL classroom concluded that the teacher found code-switching as a facilitator in their teaching mainly in explaining difficult words and meanings, making relevant interpretations, illustrating grammar rules, and generally ease the process of organizing and managing the classroom. The concern is, to what degree are the claims sure to be true? Rising motivation does not ensure the students' fluency in utilizing the language. A student could be eager to learn the rules of prepositions in his first language and achieve everything theoretically right, yet still, be unable to correctly construct the prepositions in his speech because he could not make up the sentence in the targeted

language as he was supposed to. This scenario alone proved that using code-switching harms students' productive skills and possibly results in poor academic performance. Students could claim that they enjoy the English lesson in their first language more than usual because it is taught in a language they can understand.

Still, it is undeniable that their academic results will eventually provide a clear indicator of their 'enjoyment'. The same concern goes for the claims made by the teachers in the study's findings. Is the use of code-switching solely for the purpose of facilitating their teaching? If yes, how is that helping to ensure students' meaningful learning? These claims can be seen as a 'mask' to conceal the 'leap' the teachers made to skip the complex process of delivering the lesson in the full targeted language. Teachers might find code-switching convenient and proceed to overuse it for their ease of the lesson. Hence, finding out the impact of code-switching in an ESL classroom specifically for low proficiency learners and their perceptions towards it is necessary to see whether the practice should be given a pass or 'smash'.

Aims and Research Questions

The primary research objectives of this study are to investigate teachers' practice of code-switching in a few low-proficiency students' ESL language classrooms, to identify the possible challenges students faced throughout the practice of code-switching by the teacher in a few low-proficiency students' ESL language classrooms and to identify the perceptions of the low-proficiency students towards the use of code-switching by the teachers. Specifically, the research seeks to find the answers to the proposed research questions as follow;

1. What are the practices of code-switching is done by the teachers in a few low-proficiency students' ESL language classrooms?
2. What are the possible challenges students faced throughout the practice of code-switching by the teacher in a few low-proficiency students' ESL language classrooms? Factors that lead to code switch
3. What are the perceptions of the low-proficiency students towards the use of code-switching by the teachers? What are the practical implications?

Methodology

Based on the stated objectives, this research operates as quantitative research. Chua (2020) associates quantitative research with numerical data and accuracy. This statement is equivalent to this study as the measure of central tendency will later be collected numerically to enable the researcher to calculate the average mean acquired by the sample, thereby making inferences based on the final data collected. A total of 65 respondents from low proficiency classes responded to the questionnaire adapted from Ab Razak & Pariah (2020) study on the students' belief in the use of code-switching in the ESL classrooms.

Findings

The study investigated the practice of code-switching, the identification of the possible challenges and perceptions of the low-proficiency students on the use of code-switching in ESL language classrooms. The results showed that the use of code-switching had a favorable opinion for English language teaching. Discussions are arranged based on the flow of the research questions proposed;

How is the practice of code-switching done by the teachers in a few low-proficiency students' ESL language classrooms?

The findings stated that the practice of code-switching done by the teachers in the selected ESL language classrooms is mostly done to explain the meaning of English words to the students. 30 of the 65 willing participants in the questionnaire who agreed to participate said their teacher frequently employs code-switching to explain instructions in the classroom, which accounts for 46.2% of the total. Comparatively, 24 respondents representing 36.9% of the overall number, said their teacher rarely uses code-switching for that purpose. A total of 7 respondents, or 10.8% of the sample, agreed that their teacher always uses code-switching to clarify instructions in their ESL language classes, whereas 4 respondents, or 6.2%, answered that their teacher never used code-switching for the purpose mentioned above.

Table 1
The purposes of code-switching practices in the classroom.

Item	% of Frequency				
	Never	Rarely	Often	Always	TOTAL
Q1. My teacher uses code-switching to explain instructions.	6.2	36.9	46.2	10.8	100
Q2. My teacher uses code-switching to teach grammar.	7.7	43.1	38.5	10.8	100
Q3. My teacher uses code-switching to explain the meaning of words.	3.1	24.6	49.2	23.1	100
Q4. My teacher uses code-switching to give reasons for in-class activities.	7.7	44.6	36.9	10.8	100
Q5. My teacher uses code-switching to check my understanding.	9.2	33.8	43.1	13.8	100
Q6. My teacher uses code-switching to explain idioms or expressions.	10.8	32.3	41.5	15.4	100

What are the possible challenges students faced throughout the practice of code-switching in a few low-proficiency students' ESL language classrooms by the teachers?

The findings indicate that most students do not encounter any problems or issues throughout the practice of code-switching in their ESL language classrooms. According to Table 4.4.2.2's findings, Item 1's mean score is 2.03, and its standard deviation is .809. This item's low level of agreement indicates that some respondents believe that code-switching during English lessons occasionally confounds them and requires clarification of what is being taught. This indicates that most respondents did not agree with the conclusion that the practice of code-switching in ESL language classes did not cause students to get confused about the material being taught. The mean score for Item 2 is identical to Item 2, 2.03, with a standard deviation of .706. This low level of agreement indicates that most students do not believe that using codes causes the lesson to drag and go slowly. This indicates that the vast majority of respondents rejected the statement. In contrast, item 3 had a mean score of 2.20 and a standard deviation of .775. This finding suggests that the respondent has a low acceptance of this statement. We can conclude that most respondents don't agree that they fully grasp a topic until the instructor uses code-switching to explain it. With an overall average mean score of 2.09, which falls into the low level of acceptance of the items, it can be said, generally

speaking, from an analysis of the respondents' responses, that they do not really have any issues with their teacher's practice of code-switching in the ESL language classrooms.

Table 4.4.2.2
The possible challenges faced by the students throughout the practice of code-switching.

Item	Mean	Std. Deviation
Q1. The use of Code-Switching during English lessons sometimes confuses me about what is being taught.	2.03	.809
Q2. I think the use of Code-Switching causes the lessons to be draggy and slow.	2.03	.706
Q3. I understand the lesson when my teacher uses code-switching to explain it but would not understand it in English.	2.20	.775
Average	2.09	0.76

What are the perceptions of the low-proficiency students towards the use of code-switching by the teachers?

Based on the findings, it can be concluded that the students have a stronger preference for using code-switching than using one language as a medium of instruction. Although some students agree that using one language is beneficial, they find it more desirable to use code-switching as they believe that it makes a subject easier to understand and strengthens their comprehension. The mean score for Item 1 is 3.25, with a standard deviation of .685, according to the results in Table 4.4.3.3. A moderate percentage of respondents believe that their teacher uses code-switching to assist their students, particularly the "weak" ones, throughout the session, according to the item's moderate level of agreement. This means that the majority of responders supported the statement. The mean score for Item 2 is 2.62, and its standard deviation is .860. On the other hand, most students believed that their teacher uses code-switching because of the teacher's poor English skills as indicated by the moderate level of agreement. Item 3 had a mean score of 2.82 and a standard deviation of .882 on the other hand. This finding suggests that the respondent also accepts this statement to a moderate level. Therefore, we can conclude that most respondents concurred that the teacher code-switched at the students' request. With a total average mean score of 2.90, which falls into the moderate level of acceptance of the items, it can be concluded from the analysis of the respondents' responses that they agreed with the items.

Table 4.4.3.3

Students' Perceptions Towards The Reasons The Teacher Uses Code-Switching in ESL Language Classrooms

Item	Mean	Std. Deviation
Q1. To help their students, especially the 'weak' ones	3.25	.685
Q2. The teachers' English is not proficient	2.62	.860
Q3. Because their students asked them to code-switch	2.82	.882
Average	2.90	.809

Discussions

Although the teachers in Malaysian ESL language classes frequently use code-switching, particularly for academic purposes, there are situations when they do so unintentionally. Although it is done unintentionally, it can be helpful in a language-learning setting. Numerous studies have examined how often teachers use code-switching in ESL classes (Badrul & Kamaruzaman, 2009; Dykhanova, 2015; Joanna, 2014). For the students to better comprehend the teachings, the teachers typically use code-switching to explain difficult words, phrases, and grammar to the class. This finding goes in line with the finding in the study in which the teachers mainly practiced code-switching to explain words to their students. This is consistent with a study by Tibategeza and Plessis (2018) that found that students learned more effectively when they used the language they could understand.

Though the respondents unanimously stated that they do not have any issues with code-switching, the students may still have linguistic challenges because English is not their first language. Despite the widespread acceptance of code-switching in ESL classrooms, some researchers (Prucha, 1983; Ellis, 1984; Wong-Fillmore, 1985; Chaudron, 1988), particularly those who favor the Direct Method and the Audio-Lingual Method of teaching L2, assert that students do not need to understand every word said in ESL classes because code-switching interferes with the learning process (Brown, 2007). They argue that code-switching discourages learners' natural curiosity and prevents them from learning the language outside the classroom (Chambers, 1991; Halliwell & Jones, 1991; Macdonald, 1993; as cited in Jingxia, 2010). The quantity and quality of L2 input may be affected by how the L1 is used. The teachers do not fully utilize the learning time in the classroom, and the students do not learn as much as they can. This is in contrast to when teachers only speak in the target language (Jingxia, 2010). Additionally, it is believed that code-switching during classroom instruction may cause students to internalize incorrect L2 forms causing mistakes to become more difficult to correct (Wong-Fillamore, 1985). Since they believe it to be the standard usage of the language they are learning, the students could follow it without noticing their errors (Jingxia, 2010). Code-switching is, therefore, only permitted in second-language classrooms under the strict supervision of the teachers.

Looking into the students' perceptions, it can be inferred from the study's results that students' perceptions regarding the usage of code-switching in ESL classes were positive. The fact that the students thought code-switching could help them during English courses shows that they held this belief. The results of this study agreed with studies by Joanna (2014),

Adibah (2016), and Nurhamidah et al. (2018), who also found that code-switching could be helpful for students learning English as a second language. The students also agreed that the lessons would be more engaging and understandable if code-switching were implemented. Additionally, they were more self-assured and eager to learn in the class that uses code-switching as opposed to an English-only medium. These positive reactions suggested that code-switching offered second-language learners a welcoming linguistic environment. These results in relation to the affective supports were consistent with those from studies by Joanna (2014), Mazlin (2015), and Memon et al. (2016). Code-switching helps students with emotional barriers like fear, anxiety, and demotivation. The reduction of students' emotive filters, according to Krashen's Affective Filter Hypothesis (1985), can guarantee the effectiveness of language learning. In ESL classes, teachers also use code-switching, repeating words and instructions in the student's native tongue, to clarify meaning.

However, because the students know that the instruction will be in their L1, they may need more motivation to study the target language, which could negatively impact their English competence level. In contrast, students in ESL classes use code-switching to aid their understanding of the lesson. Students can use code-switching as one of their languages approaches to close the gap and guarantee successful learning. Numerous research have been conducted to determine how students view and believe about code-switching (Debreli & Oyman, 2016; Adibah, 2016; Nurhamidah et al., 2018). In addition, Malaysian students frequently speak many languages. Therefore, it is common for individuals to bring their L1 learning and past knowledge to help them with their L2 study. In order to converse more comfortably with one another, the kids also use code-switching when speaking with their peers. However, since many students today are learning English instead of studying in English, the reliance on L1 should be kept to a minimum. This is concerning since it will have a detrimental impact on their English skills, ultimately hindering their employment or performance in the future.

Recommendations

Overall, this study showed that students in Malaysian ESL classrooms had a favorable opinion on code-switching, which should be accepted as one of the learning methodologies for the target language. Thus, the study has recommended several repercussions to different parties involved in the field of education. First and foremost, language officials should consider the findings of this study when developing language policies. It is because most students believed that code-switching enhances ESL lessons. The English-only policy ought to be reevaluated in light of the various needs of the students. The analyzed curriculum may likely have more positive effects on the student's second language fluency than on monolingual practices by considering the students' views and beliefs about the use of code-switching. Since one of the parties whom any adjustments made by the higher-ups will directly touch is the student, their needs should be the major priority.

Even so, teachers should be very careful and cautious when code-switching. It should not be used excessively as this could slow learning. Using code-switching to clarify meaning and impart knowledge to students inefficiently is not harmful, but using it frequently reduces L2 students' ability to engage with native speakers. Aside from this, code-switching should only be used by people who have trouble learning a language. It has been discovered that students from rural and underdeveloped areas tend to be more frightened, least motivated, and unresponsive. If teachers apply this technique wisely, it can work fairly well. This method of classroom education can provide positive outcomes by completing the syllabus requirements

and guiding learners with limited language proficiency toward their intended goals. Finally, the study is limited to one school in Shah Alam, Selangor, with only 65 participants, which is a concern for the researchers. Therefore, the results cannot be generalized to other secondary schools in Selangor and Malaysia. It is advised to conduct a nationwide study to learn what Malaysian students think about code-switching in ESL classes. Therefore, future researchers must prepare thoroughly in terms of time, budget, and intended audience to get an overall conclusive findings that would represent a bigger population.

Conclusion

As a result, this study draws the conclusion that code-switching is an effective and reliable method for teaching English to students in an ESL context. This study also reveals that code-switching is necessary when needed but must not be used extensively. The teachers must take into consideration the recommendations proposed in the study and use it as a starting point to be free to select the method they want to use, whether it be a code-switch or an English-only one. Teachers are the ones who understand their students' needs by recognizing the suitable approach required to achieve the intended learning objectives. This study suggests that code-switching may also be a useful learning approach for students with low-proficiency levels. Additionally, teachers should be more receptive to code-switching in ESL classes. It should be remembered that using code-switching to meet the requirements of the students, especially the low-proficiency ones, is not necessarily bad. Therefore, educators should avoid spreading the unfavorable assumption that code-switching can hinder students' acquisition of a second language. The unwritten norm prohibiting students from using their L1 during English lectures needs to be changed. It is important to remember that learning will not be successful if the students get nothing out of the lessons. In particular, in Malaysian educational settings, it is hoped that this study may give some light on how to help students successfully acquire and master the target language.

Acknowledgement

Corresponding Author

Syahreena Mohd Shahrom, Faculty of Education, Universiti Teknologi MARA, Puncak Alam Campus, 42300, Selangor, syahreena@uitm.edu.my

References

A. (2021a). *Code Switching in the Classroom: Convenience or Catastrophe?* General Educator Blog. https://www.fluentu.com/blog/educator/code-switching-in-the-classroom/

Ahmad, B. H., & Jusoff, K. (2009). Teachers' Code-Switching in Classroom Instructions for Low English Proficient Learners. *English Language Teaching*, *2*(2), 49–55. https://doi.org/10.5539/elt.v2n2p49

Banerjee, A., & Chaudhury, S. (2010). Statistics without tears: Populations and samples. *Industrial Psychiatry Journal*, *19*(1), 60–65. https://doi.org/10.4103/0972-6748.77642

Fachriyah, E. (2017). The functions of code-switching in an English language classroom. *Studies in English Language and Education*, *4*(2), 148–156.

https://doi.org/10.24815/siele.v4i2.6327

Ja'afar, N. S. B., & Maarof, N. B. (2016). RETRACTED: Teachers' Beliefs of Code Switching in the ESL Classroom. *Open Journal of Social Sciences*, *04*(04), 212–222. https://doi.org/10.4236/jss.2016.44030

K. (2021b). *The Top 5 Ways to Teach Different Levels of ESL Students in the Same Class*. FluentU English Educator Blog. https://www.fluentu.com/blog/educator-english/different-levels-of-esl-students/

Logsdon, A. (2020). *The Significance of Average Scores in Special Education Testing*. Verywell Family. https://www.verywellfamily.com/what-makes-a-test-score-average-in-special-education-2 161864

Morrison, C. D. (2017). *Code-switching | linguistics*. Encyclopedia Britannica. https://www.britannica.com/topic/code-switching

Pan, Y. C., & Pan, Y. C. (2011). The Use of L1 in the Foreign Language Classroom. *Colombian Applied Linguistics Journal*, *12*(2), 64–81. https://doi.org/10.14483/22487085.85

Razak, S. A., & Shah, P. M. (2020). The Students' Beliefs on using Code-Switching in the ESL Classrooms. *International Journal of Academic Research in Business and Social Sciences*, *10*(2), 166–178. https://doi.org/10.6007/ijarbss/v10-i2/6918

Simasiku, L., Kasanda, C., & Smit, T. (2015). Can Code Switching Enhance Learners' Academic Achievement? *English Language Teaching*, *8*(2), 70–77. https://doi.org/10.5539/elt.v8n2p70

Twycross, A., & Shields, L. (2004). Validity and reliability – What's it all about? *Paediatric Nursing*, *16*(10), 36. https://doi.org/10.7748/paed.16.10.36.s22