CODE-MIXING AS A BILINGUAL INSTRUCTIONAL STRATEGY IN EFL CONTEXT

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Abstract

This research investigated the code-mixing technique from perspectives of teacher and student in university teaching contexts, more specifically the use of L1 (Chinese) in L2 (English) in Chinese university English education programs. Through the analysis of results of semi-structured interview, several themes emerged: (1) from the student's perspective, the use of code-mixing at classes helps her to understand the lesson better, while she also performed resistance to the overuse of code-mixing; (2) from the perspective of the teacher, the use of code-mixing helps her to address the complex or difficult points more easily to the class; (3) the use of code-mixing influences not only linguistic competence , but also cognitive and sociocultural aspects of the learner. The results demonstrate that using bilingual instruction significantly enhance the way both teacher and student use English.

Keywords

Code-Mixing, Difficult Points, Linguistic Competence, Sociocultural Aspect

1. Introduction

Code–mixing can be defined as a phenomenon that a word or an expression from one language is used in group of words whose structure belongs to another distinct language (Wardaugh, 1990, p.104). Many education practitioners teaching English in non-English speaking countries employ code-mixing within their teaching strategies. It is widely used in bilingual communities in which speakers use their first language and the second language in particular different contexts. Code-mixing could be mutually beneficial in teaching vocabularies in classrooms contexts. Besides, it could be time-saving to explain the meaning of certain language items in L1 rather than in L2. Moreover, Atkinson (1993, p.13) points out that occasional use of the L1 (first language) gives them opportunities to express that they are intelligent, sophisticated people. In addition, the use of code-mixing provides more opportunities for bilingual learners to advance their learning by using their linguistic competence. However, the study investigating the use of code-mixing from the perspective of both teacher and student in university level still remains insufficient. In response to that insufficiency, then we conducted the following small research project exploring the use of code-mixing from the two perspectives.

1.1 The scepticism over bilingual use of L1 in L2 teaching

Some academics have drawn scepticism over the use of L1 in L2 classes. The reason of the skepticism is the view that second language acquisition often fail or is less successful. The main reason for L1 avoidance at L2 class demonstrated that the involvement of L1 in L2 learning might interfere the process of second language learning, and to ensure maximum exposure in the target language (L2). Proponents of monolingual approach stated that the monolingual method should be the only instruction in second language learning to maximize linguistic input. Moreover,some researchers see the use of L1 in L2 class as undesirable, expressing their concern that that would cause confusion and language interference among learners. Another argument views that the use of code-mixing demonstrates linguistic or conceptual gap due to the lack of equivalent expression in target language. Those views discourage the use of code-mixing in class contexts.

1.2 The benefits of code-mixing in class contexts

Despite the arguments put forward by the opponents of code-mixing, there are many researchers promote the merit aspects upon the use of code-mixing in class context. Several academics (e.g. Creese & Blackledge, 2010) have revealed that on Cummins' cross linguistic transfer theory (1991, 2005, 2007), it suggests that conceptual and linguistic aspects might be

transferred from certain language to another if the learner has enough exposure towards the other language and empowerment to learn it. As Cummins (2005) suggested, educators should promote, rather than discourage such transfer through explicit instruction. Furthermore, code- mixing could be employed to transfer the meaning from one language to another. Moreover, code-mixing could be used by learners to scaffold each other and to discipline the students in meaningful ways by teachers. Students are likely to be disciplined through the use of L1 rather than L2 in class contexts.In addition, the main advantages of the L1 in L2 teaching context in which students are treated as their real selves rather than with assumed L2 personas.

Many researchers have warned the potential drawbacks of using only monolingual instruction, because using monolingual exclusively would send a strong message to students that L1 and L2 development is different and sequential, instead of simultaneous and continuous. The most important theoretical framework for code-mixing perspective is supported by the theory of linguistic interdependent proposed by Cummins (1979). He posited that, despite the distinction of language aspects, such as pronunciation and writing conventions, there is an underlying cognitive and proficiency that is common across languages. Based on Cummins's Common Underlying Proficiency (CUP) model, bilingual children's L1 and L2 are interdependent, and their proficiency development in those languages is highly correlated. Another empirical study supporting the code-mixing was a meta-analysis on bilinguals children's reading in the United States, which also demonstrated that using L1 instruction improves, rather than impedes, children's academic achievement (Francis, Lesaux, & August, 2006). Proponents of code-mixing have suggested that the combination use of L1 and L2 in learning might provide linguistic resources for learners to activate previously acquired knowledge and to set up the fundamental base of knowledge.

2. Method

2.1 Participants

Participants in this study include an intermediate English proficiency level graduate student in China and a Chinese teacher of English of university. Several criteria were employed in selecting participants, including education backgrounds, teaching experience and language proficiency, etc. Brief backgrounds of two participants are as follow. The first participant, a 24-year-old female, is a third-semester master's student in the English education program in China. She is learning English as a second language.She is categorised as Intermediate Learner of English by her IELTS score. She has many experiences in

Teaching English. The second particpant is an English teacher in Dezhou University of China, and has taught in language college for 6 years. She was primarily responsible for teaching English major students in university.

2.2 Data Collection

This research focused on the qualitative research method. Semi-structured interview (appendix 1) has been used. Semi-structured interview is one of less rigid methods, in which the researchers use a written list of questions as a guide, but still having more opportunities to ask more questions depending on the feedback during the interview. Interviewers take good use of communicative skills, helping subjects to open up and express themselves in their own terms and at their own speed. Data were recorded and transcript with each participant. Open-ended questions were used, participants were not only encouraged to express their attitudes towards code-mixing, they were also required to explain it based on their experience by raising some specific examples.

2.3 Data Analysis

An inductive data method was adopted for decoding and analysing data. According to Mackey & Gass (2005) : "In inductive data analysis, the goal is generally for research findings to emerge from the frequent, dominant, or significant themes within the raw data, without imposing restraints as is the case with predetermined coding or analysis schemes. Inductive data analysis is determined by multiple examinations and interpretations of the data in the light of the research objectives, with the categories induced from the data. The framework for analysis is often shaped by the assumptions and experiences of the individual researcher." As examining the data, several themes emerged.

3. Findings and Discussions

3.1 Findings Concerning Student (First Participant)

3.1.1 Students' Perspectives on Code-Mixing

In this study, all Chinese teachers of English use code-mixing in classes. Primarily, when teachers want to explain complex sentences and difficult words to make their explanation easier to understand, they then shift to Chinese. Besides, it also subjects to the reality of teaching to use code-mixing.

"Teachers try to help us to understand easier. For example, they sometimes compare different words to help us understand clearly and help us notice the important points. Teachers want to give full understanding about the knowledge."

"Full English environment is what we are looking forward to, but it is difficult for both teachers and students to speak and listen to English all the time. And we have curriculum aims, for teachers they must finish these aims, so they have to use Chinese to make us understand quickly and better."

Although situations might be different related to different teachers and lessons, it is a natural situation for students when hearing Chinese in classes. According to first participant's (a student) experience, the percentage of the usage of Chinese in classes is from 20%-50%. Moreover, in intensive reading classes and extensive reading classes, teachers use more code-mixing than in listening and speaking classes.

3.1.2 Effects of code-mixing on students

Code-mixing have both positive and negative effects on the English learning of students, from linguistic aspect to cognitive level. On the one hand, code-mixing helps students understand what teachers deliver, which is in accord with English competence of students. "For example, when the teacher wants to offer some new strategies toward listening, she will introduce these strategies in Chinese. Our listening are not so good, so when teachers offer it in English, I cannot understand it." In addition, university students could be regarded as adult learners, explicit learning strategies could help them take good use of cognitive and metacognitive factors to learn. On the other hand, the results also show that if teachers use too much code-mixing in classes, students would also resist to this kind of situation. They would say that it interferes their improvement of English proficiency.

"Weaker? To some extent, if they can provide us totally English environment, it must be good for listening and oral English. But sometimes once teachers speak Chinese in classes, they will use Chinese more and more, I do not think it is good for our improvement."

3.1.3 Student's attitudes towards code-mixing

In this interview, although First participant (a student) acknowledges that a total English context is important for her language learning, she agrees with the argument that it is helpful to use code-mixing. The most significant reason is that, code-mixing provides more specific learning strategies and can serve as scaffolding for her learning progress. In order to explain this, she raised a comparison between a Chinese teachers of English and her native English teacher.

"I had one listening class before. During the first semester, a foreign teacher taught us, and in the second semester, a Chinese teacher taught us. It felt differently. To be honest, although foreign teacher provided good cultural and linguistic context, I think it is better to

have Chinese teacher's class firstly, because he can provide some good strategies in Chinese which could really help us to organize and precede our learning."

Furthermore, in response to the reality that most students and teachers grow up and live in Chinese speaking context and culture, it is difficult to render a total exposure of English environment. According to acculturation theories, it is more adaptable the use code – mixing regardless linguistic level or cognitive level.

"Although I am an English major student and even I could get good grades in some English tests, my teachers and I are not native speakers and we both do not use English easily. Sometimes, information and knowledge that delivered by teachers in Chinese are what is new and important for us. And we can understand and accept it by heart through Chinese interpretation."

3.2 Findings concerning teacher (Second Participant)

3.2.1 Reasons to use code-mixing

The second participant(a teacher) uses code-mixing in every class, although in different kind of classes, there would be slight differences of frequency of using it. Reasons for her to conduct code-mixing lay both inside of courses purpose and psychological aspects. She usually uses code-mixing when explaining difficult points and important points, as well as some abstract concepts. In her opinion, it would be acceptable for students and time saving to use code-mixing, especially for intermediate proficiency students. She also thought that based on her English proficiency, it is slightly hard for her to interpret everything totally and clearly in English.

"When I explain the grammar or some difficult points, I usually use Chinese to explain to my students. I think because it is very easy and time-saving to make them understand. There are also some other occasions, for example maybe some unexpected situations or unexpected things happen, sometimes if I do not know how to express it in English myself, I will also explain it in Chinese."

Besides, apart from linguistics aspect, there are some psychological elements lies behind code-mixing. To some extents, students have limited attention and it could not be denied that learning a language is sometimes boring for some students. In response to that, code-mixing could intrigue and maintain students' attention and interests in learning.

"If I speak English for a long time, some students cannot concentrate on the classes. Because as we all know, students have limitation of attention period and for intermediate proficiency students, it is difficult for them to understand all of materials, for which they

would lose heart. So, sometimes I should use Chinese that can easily be understood to attract their attention."

3.2.2 Teacher's attitudes towards code-mixing

Code-mixing is one of many popular strategies used in Chinese second language teaching context. Just as what she said: "My principle is to use English whenever possible and to use Chinese whenever necessary." She also said: "To some extent, it is necessary to use code-mixing, because understanding is important, if students cannot understand the content clearly, it is hard for them to learn." Besides, there are some different conventions between Chinese and English that have to be interpreted in Chinese. Furthermore, teachers play different roles in classrooms, such as teachers, organizers, advisers and communicators. Code-mixing could probably help them act as different roles. Wu said that "if you use Chinese, they can communicate with you regarding you as a teacher, they would not be afraid that they do not understand clearly." In terms of psychological reasons, it also plays an important role to stimulus and maintains the attention of students. "if we do not use Chinese, they would probably be discouraged if they feel boring to listen to English all the time."

4. Conclusion and Discussion

This study has discussed responses of an intermediate English level graduate student and a university teacher to code-mixing techniques employed in the context of University level. Based on the result of semi-structured interview with one student and one teacher, and through the inductive data analysis, several findings emerged. Firstly, code-mixing is a universal technique applied to Chinese classes. Secondly, the existence of code-mixing has its rationale and gains the approval from both students and teachers. For teacher's perspective, it demystifies them to meet the curriculum objectives. On the other hand, based on student's point of view, it makes them easier to understand and learn English learning strategies. This is consistent with the research conducted by Ahmad and Jusoff (2009) showing that the use of L1 in L2 enhances students' comprehension and learning outcomes .Furthermore, code-mixing adapts to the language reality, different conventions, teachers' roles, having been coherent with previous studies. Besides, one aspect that has rarely been discussed previously is that code-mixing provides students more comprehensible strategies to develop their second language learning. In other words, code-mixing could give them more cognitive and metacognitive strategies. However, both teachers and students clearly admit that there would be drawbacks of using code mixing too much .Related to the argument suggesting the

students are highly likely to be disciplined through the use of L1 rather than L2 in class context seemingly does not apply to university level.

These findings would probably provide some insights for future studies. However there are some limitations in this study. The most obvious one is that there is no class observation which would probably specify and strengthen the results. Besides, details of code-mixing, such as types of code-mixing conducted by teachers and more-depth reasons for code-mixing use, are some areas deserved to be explored.

Acknowledgement

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