Students’ Attitudes towards the Use of Code-Switching in Algerian EFL Classrooms

Amira HENNI
Université Frères Mentouri. Constantine 1. Algérie

Abstract: This study aims at investigating students’ attitudes towards the occurrence of code-switching in the Algerian EFL classroom. For this reason, 40 third year students have been chosen at Ali Ben Dadda secondary school in Sedrata. This case study focuses on revealing the students’ attitudes towards their own use as well as their teachers’ use of CS in an Algerian EFL classroom. It integrates a quantitative research method through a students’ questionnaire. The results exhibit that most students appreciate the use of code-switching in the Algerian EFL classroom. In other words, both students and their teachers who switch from the mother-tongue or L2 (Arabic or French, respectively) to the target language (English) and vice-versa have positive views towards code-switching. The latter thus seems to have a fruitful role in the learning process.

Key Words: Code-switching, Algerian EFL classroom, Attitudes.
Introduction

There has been a big debate in the worldwide literature whether to use the mother-tongue in foreign language classrooms. However, it seems to be that a few researches have been conducted about the use of Algerian Arabic/ French in EFL (English as a Foreign Language) classrooms. This phenomenon is referred to as code-switching (CS). It is broadly defined by Hudson (1999:51) as “the inevitable consequence of bilingualism (or generally, multilingualism)”. It is for this reason that this research gap has been addressed in order to check the occurrence of CS in Algerian EFL classrooms at the secondary level in general, and to investigate the participants’ attitudes towards the use of code-switching in the EFL classroom in particular.

1. Definitions of Code-switching

From the 1970’s onwards, the phenomenon of code-switching\(^1\) has become one field of research with many publications and organizations (Kovàcs, 2001). A search of the Linguistics and Language behavior Abstracts database shows that in 2005, more than 1,800 articles on code-switching were published in almost every branch of linguistics (Nielp, 2006). This phenomenon is widely and differently defined by many linguists. In fact, there has been some effort to unify these definitions, but this turned to be an impossible task to do (Milroy and Muysken, 1995). The term code-switching has been referred to as ‘code mixing’, ‘code shifting’, ‘language alternation’, ‘language mixture ’and‘ language switching’ (Benson, 2001), although some have differentiated between them (Pfaff, 1979). Winford (2003:141) claims that “the definition of code switching is not without controversy”. One of the problematic issues of defining CS is the fact that the term itself is spelled differently by researchers: code switching, codeswitching and code-switching. The latter will be used in this article. A broad definition of the term CS is given by Poplack (1980:200) as “the alternation of two languages within a single discourse, sentence, or constituent”. Myers-Scotton (2001) describes a code-switcher as the person who has sufficient proficiency in the two varieties he/she uses. Whereas, Duran (1994:03) argues that code-switching “implies some degree of competence in the two languages even if bilingual fluency is not yet stable”. Nevertheless,

\(^1\) The first use of the term ‘code-switching’ has been attributed to Hans Vogt in an article written in 1954(Auer,1998) which is titled “Language Contact”.

The earliest evidence of CS research in the United States dates back to the work of Aurelio Espinosa (1911), Professor of Romantic Languages at Stanford University (Benson, 2001).
Valdés-Fallis (1978) claims that switching languages within the same conversational episode, or even within the same sentence, is often looked upon as a sign of deficiency, and the speaker using it tends to be seen as less proficient.

Halmari (2004:115) refers to CS as “the mixing of two or more languages within the same conversational episode”. Yet, Gal (1988) describes this phenomenon as conversational strategy used to establish relationships. It can also be used to cross or destroy group boundaries. This phenomenon occurs mostly in bilingual communities. Speakers of more than one language are known for their ability to code-switch or mix their languages during their communication. As Anaroff and Miller (2005) indicate that many linguists have stressed the point that switching between languages is a communicative option available to a bilingual member of speech community on much the same basis as switching between styles or dialects is an option for the monolingual speaker.

2. Attitudes towards Code-Switching in the FL Classroom

Within the world of language use, code-switching in foreign language classrooms has recently been the subject of considerable debate. Commonly, this phenomenon is viewed with suspicion in EFL classrooms. When analysts address the issue (the use of the mother tongue in EFL classrooms), there seem to be two opposing language attitudes among them; target language exclusivity and the opposition.

On the one side of the issue, the occurrence of code-switching in FL classrooms has sometimes been of lower status; a strategy handled by weak language users to compensate for language deficiency. Some researchers consider CS as a negative and undesirable behavior. According to Elridge (1996:303), it is “a failure to use the [mother tongue] and learn the target language or unwillingness to do so”. This leads to a lowering of standards (Baily and Nunan, 1996). Some other researchers, like Sridhar (1996:59), describe this kind of use (the use of CS in FL classes) as “a sign of laziness or mental sloppiness and inadequate command of the language”. Cummins & Swain (1986:105), for instance, argue that “the progress in the second language is facilitated if only one code is used in the classroom” asserting that “the teacher’s exclusive use of the target code will conduct the ‘pull’ towards the native code” (ibid). Accordingly, Willis (1981) adds that when students start speaking in their own language without their teacher’s permission, it generally means that something is wrong in the lesson. In this respect, Maccaro (2001) claims that the students’ exclusive use of the target language provides them with more exposure to the foreign language which makes it real. It
also permits learners to experience unpredictability and develops their own in-built language system. In the same vein, Other researchers like Chaudron (1988) and Ellis (1984) also agree that it is important for second language (SL) and foreign language (FL) teachers to expose learners to as many language functions as possible in the target language. In this respect, Wong –Fillmore (1985) emphasizes that learners who are used to hearing their teachers use the L1 tend to ignore the TL and therefore do not fully benefit from valuable target language input. Ellis (1984) puts in that the use or overuse of the L1 by SL and FL teachers will deprive learners of valuable TL input. To conclude, for these supporters, there seem to be a feeling that languages should be kept strictly demarcated (Eldrige, 1996) despite the fact that code-switching is employed in the “repertoires of most bilingual people and in most bilingual communities” (Romaine, 1989:02).

However, on the other hand, other analysts like Cook (2001) and Richards & Rogers (2001) who are specialized in second language acquisition state that although the exposure to the target language can help to achieve success, this exposure may not always work effectively in every context. According to them, there are still lots of factors affecting the learning process. Jusoff (2009) asserts that exposure to the target language does not ensure success; on the contrary, it leads to confusion and frustration because the input is vague to the students. He (ibid: 50) further adds that “code-switching should not be considered as a sign of defect in the teacher”, but it should be looked at as “a careful strategy employed by the teachers”. Moreover, an extensive body of literature studies reports that the use of code-switching in the classroom is not only a normal but a useful tool of learning. Both Cook (2001) and Stern (1992) insist that students’ L1 deserves a place in FL classrooms. They try to question the long-held belief of excluding the L1 from the classroom. Cook (2001) refers to code-switching in the classroom as a natural response in a bilingual situation. According to him (ibid: 242), the fact of using students’ L1 is a “learner preferred strategy” and to let them use their mother-tongue is a humanistic approach as it allows them to say what they really want to say. Thus, learner’s L1 should be regarded as a resource not a barrier to successful learning. He (2001) also puts that teacher’s ability to use both the mother tongue and the target language creates an authentic learning environment. Stern (1992), in turn, believes that it may be the time to ‘reconsider’ the use of crosslingual \(^2\) strategy, though in theory language teaching today is entirely intralingual \(^3\). According to the same analyst (ibid: 285), it seems inevitable for the learner to work from an L1 reference base, so it can be helpful for him to

\(^2\) Crosslingual strategy is the use of both the first language (L1) and the target language (TL).

\(^3\) Intralingual strategy is the exclusive use of the target language
“orient himself in the L2 through the L1 medium or by relating L2 phenomena to their equivalents in L1”. Moreover, both Schmitt & McCarthy (1997: 02) write that “a learner’s L1 is one of the most important factors in learning L2 vocabulary”. Weinreich (1970) adds that code-switching, in some cases, allows learners to express themselves more fluidly when they cannot conceive an appropriate word within a limited period of time. The fact of using code-switching in the FL classroom is regarded by some analysts as a “legitimate strategy” (Cook, 2001) and no matter how it might be disruptive during a conversation to the listener, it still provides an opportunity for language development (Skiba, 1997). The opponents of excluding the mother tongue from FL classroom assert that it is not only unpractical to exclude the L1 from the classroom but it is also likely to deprive students of an important tool for language learning (Duff & Polio (1990) and Skinner (1985)). Furthermore, Nunan & Lamb (1996) present the problems associated with the exclusive use of the target language in FL classrooms. Shortly, they claim that the exclusion of the mother tongue especially with monolingual students at lower English proficiency levels seems to be impossible. In this environment where learners share the same first language and only use English inside the classroom, exclusive use of the target language in class seems to be rather impossible; it is unrealistic as the two languages are active inside the students’ (and even teachers’) heads and will influence each other. This is our view in this article. In this respect, Ferguson (2003) sums up that ideological and conceptual sources of suspicion all often attached to classroom code-switching, suggesting that deep rooted attitudes may not be easy to change.

3. Research Design

3.1. Research Questions

This article focused on seeking students’ attitudes towards their own as well as their teacher’s use of code-switching in EFL classrooms. For this reason, two questions were aimed to be answered. They were as follows:
1) What are the student’s attitudes towards their use of Arabic/ French in the EFL classroom?
2) What are the students’ attitudes towards their teachers’ use of Arabic/ French in the EFL classroom?
3.2. Means of Research

This work was conducted at the level of an Algerian secondary school in Sedrata (it is in Souk-Ahras). The name of this secondary school is Ali Ben Dadda. In this study, a questionnaire was designed and distributed to 40 third year students. For this study, a quantitative research design was handled in order to answer the research questions of the study. A close-ended questionnaire was adapted to collect data quantitatively.

3.3. Participants

The participants who took part in this study were 40 randomly selected third year students (I prefer to refer to pupils as students) at the secondary school who had learnt English for at least seven years at both intermediate and secondary school.

3.4. Results

The questionnaire was administered to the selected sample, and data were analyzed. The representation of data is as follows.

1) How often do you use Arabic/ French in EFL class?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Option</th>
<th>Always</th>
<th>Sometimes</th>
<th>Rarely</th>
<th>Never</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Number</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percentage</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>62.5 %</td>
<td>12.5%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 01: The frequency of students’ CS in EFL class.

A total of twenty five students (62.5%) reported that they sometimes use code-switching in the EFL classroom. Ten students (25%) answered that they always use Arabic. However, only five students (12.5%) claimed that they rarely code-switch. The last option ‘never’ was left out, i.e. no one of this sample uses only English in the EFL classroom. This might be due to students’ lack of English proficiency.

2) What is the impact of using Arabic/ French on learning English as a foreign in class?
As it is shown in the above table, nineteen students (47.5%) asserted that code-switching in EFL classroom is extremely beneficial. Sixteen students (40%) agreed that CS is beneficial. However, only two (5%) claimed that it has no impact, whereas three (7.5%) stated that it is harmful. This might be due to the fact that Arabic is their mother tongue in which learners cannot get rid of and they use it as a means to help them learning English.

3) How often does your teacher use Arabic/ French in EFL classroom

It is apparent from table 04 that thirteen students (32.5%) stated that their teachers always use Arabic in their EFL class. More than half of the students (60%) claimed that their teachers sometimes code-switch to Arabic. When asked about their teachers’ frequency of code-switching to Arabic, only three students chose ‘rarely, but no one put never. This fact might take place because teachers try to use this means in order to help their students to understand the foreign language. This is again due to the students’ incompetency in English.

4) In what cases does your teacher switch to Arabic/ French in EFL class?

Table 02: The impact of CS on learning English as a foreign language.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Option</th>
<th>Extremely beneficial</th>
<th>Beneficial</th>
<th>No impact</th>
<th>Harmful</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Number</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percentage</td>
<td>47.5%</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>7.5%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 03: The Frequency of Teachers’ CS in EFL classroom.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Option</th>
<th>Always</th>
<th>Sometimes</th>
<th>Rarely</th>
<th>Never</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Number</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percentage</td>
<td>32.5%</td>
<td>60%</td>
<td>7.5%</td>
<td>0 %</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 04: Cases of teacher’s CS to Arabic/French in EFL class.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Option</th>
<th>Manage class</th>
<th>Explaining grammar rules</th>
<th>Explaining new vocabulary items</th>
<th>Check comprehension</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Number</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percentage</td>
<td>12.5%</td>
<td>22.5%</td>
<td>37.5%</td>
<td>27.5%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
As shown in table 05, students indicated that their teachers were using CS to Arabic /French mostly to translate new vocabulary items and check comprehension, (37.5%), (27.5%), respectively. According to nine students (22.5%), their teachers used Arabic to explain grammar rule. Only five students (12.5%) reported their teachers code-switched to manage class. This might be interpreted by the fact that vocabulary and grammar are the bases to learn the foreign language.

5) Do you prefer your teacher using Arabic/ French in the EFL classroom?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Option</th>
<th>Always</th>
<th>Sometimes</th>
<th>Rarely</th>
<th>Never</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Number</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percentage</td>
<td>22.5%</td>
<td>67.5%</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>0 %</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 05: Students’ preference of their teacher using CS in EFL classroom.

67.5% of the students (the majority of students) preferred their teachers to sometimes use code-switching in EFL classroom. Nine students (22.5%) noted that they always like their teachers to use Arabic in class. However, only four student participants preferred if their teachers rarely used Arabic. Nobody chose the ‘never’ option. All the students preferred their teachers to code-switch in the class, but with degrees, might be due to the fact that learners might understand better if other known languages are used in their foreign class.

3.5. Discussion

From the Data presented above, it is quite clear that code-switching is a common and advisable phenomenon among students. Moreover, the results revealed that the majority of students have positive attitudes towards their own use as well as their teachers’ use of Arabic/French in EFL class, i.e. code-switching is not always bad for students and their teachers. It makes it easy for the teacher to explain new and difficult matters and for students to easily grasp what has been explained. Nevertheless, some students disagreed with the use of CS in the EFL class. Thus, this phenomenon should be used in a limited manner and only if necessary.

Conclusion

This study exhibits the views of a sample of Algerian secondary school students, exactly in Sedrata, towards their own use and their teachers’ use of code-switching in their EFL
classroom, i.e. to switch from English into Arabic/French and vice-versa. The findings of the current study show that Algerian students mostly have positive views towards the use of code-switching in their EFL classroom. Also, their teachers’ use of the mother tongue (or the L1) is perceived mainly helpful in explaining new vocabulary items, checking comprehension and explaining grammar rules. In the light of these findings, hopefully code-switching has a fruitful goal in learning a foreign language.

This small study is conducted quantitatively. Further studies with the same topics need to be conducted qualitatively by observing the Algerian EFL classroom and taking notes to make the results more authentic.

Appendix:

Students’ Questionnaire

Please answer the questions below honestly, the information you provide will be merely used for research purpose.

1) How often do you use Arabic/French in EFL class?

2) What is the impact of using Arabic/French on learning English as a foreign in class?

3) How often does your teacher use Arabic/French in EFL classroom?

4) In what cases does your teacher switch to Arabic/French in EFL class?
   1. Manage class
   2. Explaining grammar rules
   3. Explaining new vocabulary items
   4. Check comprehension

5) Do you prefer your teacher using Arabic/French in the EFL classroom?

References


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