CODE-SWITCHING IN ENGLISH TEACHING FOR STUDENTS IN VIETNAM

● DINH LY VAN KHANH

ABSTRACT:

This study investigates Vietnamese teachers' awareness of code-switching in English Language Teaching (ELT) in the context of Vietnam. A total of 10 teachers from different universities and schools in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam participated in this study. The data sets were collected via questionnaires and semi-structured interviews. The study's findings confirm the useful functions of code-switching in ELT classrooms. The results also highlight that the use of Vietnamese in different contexts of ELT classrooms is a conscious process of EFL teachers.

Keywords: Code-switching, functions, ELT classrooms, language choices, teachers perspective.

1. Introduction

Code-switching, the phenomenon in which two or more languages are used in everyday interaction between people, is one of the sociolinguistics subjects that has caught many scholars' significant interests over the last two decades. Since code-switching exists in a wide range of different situations, this study will focus only on the language education environment or, more precisely, on ELT classroom context.

Over the past few years, Vietnam has made remarkable progress in developing the economy and trading with other countries in the region and the rest of the world. After its admission into the WTO in 2007, Vietnam and other nations' economic relations have rapidly expanded. Many international investors have seen Vietnam as a promising investment area for their business. As a result, more and more foreign companies, most of which require English as a means of communication, have begun to pour money into our country. Accordingly, a massive demand for skilled professional employees with good English command has significantly increased in Vietnam's labour market. These things explain why Vietnamese people nowadays have paid greater attention than ever before to English learning.

Nowadays, English has become very popular in Vietnam, and the use of this language can be noticed in every corner of the country, such as on the street, in the market, in teenagers 'gossip, in ELT classrooms, etc. Therefore, language choice, or more specifically, code-switching, will appear in these places since the people can choose between Vietnamese and English to communicate according to their context. In ELT classrooms in Vietnam, it is easy to notice code-switching between English and Vietnamese in both teachers' and students 'discourse. However, few research studies have been conducted to study this phenomenon and its effects on English learning and teaching in Vietnam. Therefore, this study aims to provide useful information for Vietnamese teachers about the functions of code-switching in English teaching and which language to use in the context of Vietnamese classrooms, all of which are interesting issues that should be taken into consideration. Thus, the two research questions are as follow:

1. What are the functions of code-switching in English language teaching (ELT) classrooms?

2. In which situations does code-switching appear in English teaching for Vietnamese students?

If appropriately answered, these two questions can prove the positive effects of using L1 on English

learning and show how language teachers, especially Vietnamese teachers, can use their mother tongue appropriately in their teaching.

This study consists of six sections. Section 1 briefly introduces the current English-using situation in Vietnam and the existence of code-switching in Vietnamese ELT classrooms. Section 2 discusses code-switching in general and presents relevant information about some studies conducted on code-switching functions in ELT classrooms and the situations in which code-switching appears in the learning and teaching of English. Section 3 gives detailed information about participants and methods of data collection. Section 4 presents the data analysis and interpretation. Section 5 discusses findings grounded in the data presented in the previous chapter. Section 6, also the last chapter, explicitly answers the research questions, gives some suggestions for language practitioners, and makes future research recommendations.

2. Literature review

2.1. Code-switching and some related terms.

2.1.1. Code and code choice

A code can simply be defined as a communication system developed by the members of a particular community to communicate with each other. It represents any systems such as a language or a variety of language that two or more people use to interact with each other in reality (Wardhaugh, 2002, para. 1). Sociolinguistic scholars prefer to use the term "code" widely because it is neutral and arouses no people's emotions.

Since code can be anything that people use in their communication, there is almost always more than one code available for every individual in the real world. Indeed, all people from monolingual communities to bi and multilingual communities must choose an appropriate code to use when communicating with other individuals. For example, the monolinguals can choose between a formal or informal variety of a language to convey different social meanings to their interlocutors. In bilingual and multilingual communities, the choice can be between more than two languages, and the switching and mixing of codes can also occur in social situations. For that reason, the term "code choice" has appeared in sociolinguistics to define the choice of using a particular code in a particular situation of individuals from their language resources.

2.1.2. Code-switching and Code-mixing

As mentioned earlier, each individual has different choices of code in their interaction with other people. In multilingual communities, these choices are more varied since people have access to more languages and, therefore, have various ways to use their resources. Several terms have been used to describe these choices, including code-switching, code-mixing, code-alternation, language – mixing, and code-shifting. Although there are controversial opinions among scholars about the use of these terms, we will focus only on the use of the terms code-switching (CS) and code-mixing (CM) for this review.

For some scholars such as Bokamba (1988), code-switching is the cover term to mean code-switching and code-mixing. When people have more than one code at their disposal, they have a choice to select a particular code to speak, and they may also decide to switch from one code to another code even in a short utterance or in just a part of a sentence. This switching will create a new code known as code-switching (Wardhaugh, 2002, para. 1)

However, according to those who make a distinction between CS and CM,

Code-switching is the embedding or mixing words, phrases and sentences from two codes within the same speech and across sentence boundaries (Bokamba, 1988, as cited in Kachru (1978, 1982) and Sridhar (1980)).

whereas,

Code -various linguistic units: affixes, words, phrases, and clauses from two different grammatical systems or subsystems with the same sentence and the same speech situation (Bokamba, 1988, pp.24).

In other words, CS is the phenomenon occurring when the two codes are used within one conversation or between sentences, while CM only takes place within one sentence (i.e. within clauses and sentence boundaries). Unlike CS, CM involves grammar issues and is governed by two constraints: the free morpheme constraint and the equivalence constraint (Jacobson, 1997, as cited in R.Jcobson).

For many sociolinguistic experts, there are two common types of code-switching: intra-sentential CS - the change of code within a sentence and inter-sentential CS - the change of code at sentence boundaries. It is easy to realize that inter-sentential CS seems to be code-switching in general, and intra-sentential CS is similar to the nature of code-mixing.

However, according to Blom and Gumperz (1972), there is another way to classify code-switching. According to them, Code-switching should be categorized as situational CS and metaphorical CS. If we look at the change of code according to the situation, we will have situational CS. Besides, if the change of code aims to ensure the social status, power or distance of somebody or show a particular emotion for somebody, we will have metaphorical CS.

2.2. Code-switching in English language teaching classrooms

2.2.1. The functions of code-switching in ELT classrooms

Code-switching is a widely observed phenomenon happening every day in foreign language teaching. In this specific context, there are only two codes from which students can choose to perform the alternation: the native language and the target language that students have to acquire.

Before considering code-switching functions in ELT classrooms, it would be a good idea to take a quick look at the use of code-switching in a bilingual or multilingual context, which is its natural context in the real world.

According to Oclay, in his article "The functions of code-switching in ELT classrooms" (2005), bilingual individuals' use of code-switching can have two functions. The first one is the use for self-expression, as implied code-switching speakers switch to manipulate or influence or define the situation as they wish, and to convey nuances of meaning and personal intention" (Oclay, 2005, as cited in Trudgill, 2000). In other words, it is the way for people from bilingual or multilingual communities to convey different intentional meanings to other people in communication. The second function of code-switching is the tool for maintaining group relationships and creating solidarity among members in a bilingual community (Oclay, 2005, para.2). That is to say, people in these societies tend to switch from one language to another language simply "to signal the speaker's ethnic identity and solidarity with the addressee" (Holmes, 1992, para. 3).

After knowing the above functions of code-switching in its familiar context, it is time to look at its use in ELT classrooms, especially from the teachers' perspective. Bear in mind that a language classroom is also a social group. Therefore, the

functions between the two contexts will probably have some things in common. It should also be noticed that language teachers are not always aware of their alternation process between languages when teaching. In other words, this is sometimes an unconscious behaviour which has no function at all. In this analysis, we will only focus on three primary functions that can benefit students in their learning. They are topic switch, affective function, and repetitive function (Oclay, 2005, as cited in Mattson and Burenhult, 1999)

Topic switch refers to the teachers 'language alternation according to a particular situation. For example, in presenting new vocabulary, teachers can shift his/her language to his/her students' mother tongue when explaining a particular word at the moment of teaching. In this case, the use of L1 helps students understand difficult words more clearly, and therefore the code-switching has a positive effect on the teaching of English here.

Talking about affective functions, code-switching can be used as a way to express emotions and feelings of the teacher to students. Teachers can provide learners with a comfortable learning environment by telling jokes, singing a song, or chatting with them sometimes in their native language to maintain good relationships. In this way, teachers can understand more about the students and their problems and have effective ways to help them in their studies.

The last function of code-switching in classroom context is repetitive function. In this case, the teacher will first instruct in English and use the native language to clarify its meanings later. This function can be useful for weaker students. However, if this repetition is used frequently in the classroom, students may neglect to listen to the first English instruction since it always has a translation for them to follow.

2.2.2. The existence of code-switching in different contexts of ESL classrooms.

Since the existence of both the target language and the mother tongue of the learners in ELT classroom is an evident phenomenon, it is essential to study the cases and the dimensions in which code-switching can occur.

According to Athony J. Liddicoat (2007), there are four dimensions: learning focus, modes of communication, degree of creativity, and participants that need to be considered in this study.

Learning focus refers to the aims that teachers want the students to achieve in their language learning. When the focus is on improving students' communicative competence, then code-switching should be limited so that students can have a chance to practice and acquire the language naturally. However, when the focus is on the grammar points or new vocabulary items, the teacher can use code-switching to ensure the students' understanding and make the lesson more code-switching. Students can also be allowed to use L1 in their learning when dealing with complex situations that they may not know how to express in the target language.

Modes of communication imply the involvement of the learning of writing, reading, speaking, and listening. Since the process of reading and writing gives students a chance to enhance their comprehensive skills, the maximum use of the target language should be applied. However, when reading or writing texts are too complicated, which require students to understand clearly and think deeply about the situation, the L1 can be used for both teachers and students to express their ideas and analysis. For speaking and listening, the situation can be the same when talking or listening about complex issues.

The third dimension is the degree of creativity. In this case, code-switching should be a possible option rather than a useful strategy for students in this dimension. Students will be able to use their creativity to ask and express their ideas in simple language even though the issue can be very complicated. As a result, they do not need to use their mother tongue in these situations.

The fourth dimension is the participant. Language teachers need to understand clearly the participants in their teaching. Students, at any level, may need the use of their first language to engage in learning. Teachers, on the other hand, also need to use L1 to explain new ideas or give guidance in students' discussion of some specific and intricate issues. Therefore, teachers' code-switching can appear in these situations to help students with difficult concepts they cannot understand in the target language and encourage them in their study.

As for the Vietnamese classroom context, there is a study of Kieu Hang Kim Anh conducted on Vietnamese university teachers' attitudes in the use of Vietnamese in ELT. This research has pointed out that code-switching between two languages occurs intentionally in some particular situations and is very useful for teaching and learning English. According to the students' levels, some of the situations are explaining grammatical points, explaining complicated terminologies and abstract words, checking for understanding, and giving feedback.

3. Methodology

This section presents the methods of investigation employed in this study. As a result, it deals with the main issues such as participants, questionnaires, interviews, and data collection procedures.

3.1. Participants

A total of 10 Vietnamese teachers of English (seven females and three males) from two universities, one gifted senior high school, and one junior high school in Ho Chi Minh City, were invited to participate in this research. Of the ten teachers, five had masters degrees in TESOL and Applied Linguistics and were teaching both majored and non-majored English students at Van Lang university and Ho Chi Minh City University of Technology. Another three teachers working in the gifted senior high school were studying to get a masters degree in Applied Linguistics. Their ages were between 22 and 33, while their teaching experience ranged from 2 to 10 years. After receiving the ten teachers 'respondents to the questionnaires designed for this study, only five teachers with further study in TESOL and Linguistics were asked to attend the interview section. Their names were Nguyên (the only male), Vân, Hằng, Hạnh, Mai, respectively.

3.2. Questionnaire

The questionnaire was designed to get the answers from the ten teachers mentioned above about the use of code-switching in their teaching. It aimed to explore the existence as well as the function of code-switching in ELT classrooms. This questionnaire consisted of two parts. The first one is about the participants background and the second one deals with their opinions about code-switching and how they use it in ELT classrooms.

3.3. Interview

A short interview was conducted in English with each of the five teachers. Each interview lasted between 10 to 15 minutes, focusing on these following questions:

1) Should Vietnamese teachers use Vietnamese in ELT classrooms? Why and why not?

2) Do teachers always switch language on purpose?

3) What are the purposes of using code-switching in English teaching?

4) In which situation will Vietnamese teachers switch the language in their teaching?

5) Why do teachers switch the language in those situations?

Besides these key questions, examples and follow-up questions were also included in the interview to encourage interviewees to give more detailed answers.

3.4. Procedures

The two following steps describe the data collection procedures for this study:

- A total of 10 copies were distributed to the teachers working in different universities and schools in Ho Chi Minh city, as mentioned earlier. All of the ten copies were returned to the researcher.

- After receiving the questionnaires, five teachers with further study in TESOL and Linguistics were selected for the interviews. Five interviews were organized separately with the permission of each teacher. During these interviews, written notes as well as records were allowed by the participants.

The data, after being obtained, were critically analyzed in the following section.

4. Data analysis

This section analyzes the data collected from the questionnaires and interviews to examine code-switching functions and find out the existence of code-switching in ELT classrooms in Vietnam.

At first glance, 100% of participants believe that code-switching is a positive phenomenon in the process of English teaching in classrooms and could be very useful in some cases. All of them have experienced code-switching in their teaching, and most indeed have seen it as one of the essential strategies in their teaching methods.

It is also observed that the teachers' use of code-switching is not always performed intentionally (100%). This finding has confirmed the point made in the literature review that teachers sometimes do not realize the existence of code-switching in their language using. It can simply be regarded as a natural behaviour of language teachers without serving any functions.

Regarding the situations in which code-switching exits in ELT classrooms in Vietnam, "checking for understanding" (100%), "chatting

with students" (100%), "explaining new grammar points" (80%), and "explaining activities/ task instruction" (80%) were the most popular situations. Besides, "explaining new words" (60%) is also a common situation here when Vietnamese teachers want to save teaching time for more practicing in other skills.

As regards the reason for using code-switching in language teaching, the findings indicated that "making sure the understanding of students" (100%), "expressing emotion and maintain good relationships with students" (100%), and "making it easier for students to understand the lesson" (80%) were the three main reasons that participants chose with high frequency. Those reasons can easily be recognized as correspondences with code-switching functions in ELT classrooms presented in the previous literature review.

It should be noticed that the data from five interviews was regarded as the reinforcement for the result from questionnaires. More detailed information from these interviews will be presented in the next section, which is Discussion.

5. Discussion

5.1. Functions of code-switching in ELT classrooms

Data presentation reveals that Vietnamese teachers code-switching serves various functions like explaining vocabulary and grammar, checking comprehension, and chatting with students in the classroom. Teachers, in fact, often switch code when they explain or confirm the meaning of new words or new grammar points as well as instructions. This reflects that when it comes to explaining complex issues, teachers usually think of Vietnamese as a way to ensure the understanding of students in what they are learning. Moreover, in the five teachers views, using Vietnamese can be seen as an effective way of making the lesson easier for students to acquire according to each particular class level.

In informal talks or chit chat, it is easy to see that Vietnamese is the code choice for both teachers and students in Vietnam. Explaining this phenomenon, Nguyên thought that students might enjoy a joke or a funny story told in Vietnamese than in English. By switching the language, the teacher will create a more comfortable and less-stressed learning environment in the classroom. In addition, teachers can have a chance to express

their emotions through their funny activities and strengthen their good relationships with their students. This function of code-switching will help students to learn better and have more interest in their studies.

5.2. The existence of code-switching in ELT classrooms

Data presentation reveals that code-switching obviously has a place in ELT classrooms. Furthermore, the situations in which the use of L1 comes into play with a high frequency include "checking comprehension", "chatting with students", "explaining new grammar points", "explaining activities/ task instruction", and "explaining new words." This result can be explained as follows. Except for chatting with students, teachers' use of L1 in the other activities aims at temporarily lifting the communication barrier and focusing students' attention on the target knowledge. In this way, they can make sure that students understand what is being taught. As for chatting with students, teachers' choice of L1 can be put down to their intention to establish an intimate relationship with learners. Furthermore, people tend to use their mother tongue to talk to people who share the same language. On the whole, when its use is adapted with consideration to the context of each specific class, code-switching could be seen as an efficient tool that teachers can widely use in ELT classrooms.

6. Conclusion and Recommendation

In recent years, although the application of CLT, which supports mainly the use of English in classrooms, has been processed widely in every school level in Vietnam, the use of Vietnamese in the process of teaching English is still widespread and has been considered one of the causes of the low communicative competence in English of Vietnamese students. This is partly because Vietnamese teachers are still unaware of each language's value in ELT classrooms, and the use of which languages in which situations is still a controversial issue. Therefore, this study hopes to shed light on these problems and makes a small contribution to the improvement in the quality of ELT in Vietnam.

On the whole, this study was conducted to answer two following research questions:

1. What are the functions of code-switching in English language teaching (ELT) classrooms?

2. In which situations does code-switching appear in English teaching for Vietnamese students?

The findings of this study, besides giving an affirmation about the valuable role of L1 in L2 teaching, have shown the emphasis on the use of code-switching in ELT classrooms as a conscious process of language teachers. That is to say, teachers' code-switching 'must be the result of a conscious decision, not of what just come out of a teacher's mouth at any particular moment' (Irujo, 2004, para. 3).

Regarding the functions of code-switching in ELT classrooms mentioned in the first question, the findings claimed that code-switching serves as an efficient tool to convey critical information of the lesson to students, ensure students' understanding, and strengthen good relationships and solidarity between teacher and students. Moreover, if code-switching is appropriately used, it can create a comfortable environment for learning and can be implemented as a useful strategy for maintaining the smooth flow in classroom interaction and communication.

Regarding the second research question, the data revealed that code-switching could appear in every aspect of language teaching as long as it has positive effects in the study or, more precisely, in students' understanding. On the whole, the existence of code-switching in ELT classrooms is unavoidable and should be regarded as a positive and necessary phenomenon in language teaching and learning. Therefore, based on the level of students and the context of each particular class, code-switching should be used intentionally, not unconsciously, as a part of teaching methods to convey essential information of the lesson to students so that they can successfully achieve their learning purposes.

For future research, it is recommended that further experimental studies about the positive and negative effects of code-switching in English language teaching for Vietnamese students should be conducted in order to evaluate the actual role of code-switching in ELT classrooms in Vietnam. Besides, it would be great to study the use of code-switching as an ideal strategy for language education and how to control and apply teachers' and learners' code-switching to different ELT classroom contexts ∎

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NHẬN THỨC CỦA GIÁO VIÊN VIỆT NAM VỀ CHUYỂN ĐỔI NGÔN NGỮ TRONG GIẢNG DẠY TIẾNG ANH (ELT) TRONG BỐI CẢNH TẠI VIỆT NAM

● ThS. ĐINH LÝ VÂN KHANH
Trường Đại học Văn Lang

TÓM TẮT:

Bài báo này trình bày nghiên cứu tìm hiểu về nhận thức của giáo viên Việt Nam về chuyển đổi ngôn ngữ trong giảng dạy tiếng Anh (ELT) trong bối cảnh tại Việt Nam. Tổng cộng có 10 giáo viên đến từ các trường đại học và phổ thông khác nhau tại Thành phố Hồ Chí Minh - Việt Nam tham gia vào nghiên cứu này. Dữ liệu được thu thập thông qua bảng câu hỏi và phỏng vấn bán cấu trúc. Các phát hiện xác nhận các chức năng hữu ích của chuyển đổi ngôn ngữ trong lớp học tiếng Anh. Kết quả cũng nhấn mạnh rằng việc sử dụng tiếng Việt trong các ngữ cảnh khác nhau tại các lớp học tiếng Anh là một quá trình có ý thức của giáo viên.

Từ khóa: Chuyển mã, chức năng, lớp học ELT, lựa chọn ngôn ngữ, quan điểm của giáo viên.