

## **AN ANALYSIS OF CODE-SWITCHING BY LANGUAGE TEACHERS WITH STUDENTS OF MIX PROFICIENCY LEVELS OF ENGLISH AT A SUB-URBAN SECONDARY SCHOOL**

Norkhairi Ahmad<sup>1)</sup>, Syafini Ismail<sup>2)</sup>

<sup>1)</sup>Universiti Kuala Lumpur Malaysia France Institute, Selangor, Malaysia,

<sup>2)</sup>SMK Putrajaya Presint 9 (2), Putrajaya, Malaysia,

Corresponding Author: norkhairi@unikl.edu.my

### **ABSTRACT**

*Code-switching is a linguistic phenomenon within bilingual and multilingual settings around the world. For a multiracial country like Malaysia, it is crucial to examine the linguistic realities of the multilingual communities where the presence of code-switching is the hallmark. A crucial area where code-switching happens but not thoroughly studied is within the educational at school between teachers and students. This study set outs to explore the nature of code-switching that occur between language teachers and students in the school context. A qualitative case-study method via purposive sampling of seven English language teachers at a sub-urban secondary school was adopted for this research endeavor. Rich data was elicited via written interviews comprising five key questions were distributed to all the English language teachers as respondents. The teachers responded in full to all questions and the data were prepared, qualitatively analyzed and verified. A summary of the responses was generated and presented as key findings for the study. There were general consensus among the English teachers that code-switching is present as part of their repertoire of tools and strategies to ease and facilitate the learning process when situations demand for it. Code-switching as a tool serves useful communication and pedagogic functions for the teachers to utilize strategically and not indiscriminately. It is used only when necessary, particularly when teaching groups of students with low language proficiency. The findings from this study are significant as it shed light on the realities of teaching and learning languages. The contrastive view that code-switching is not permissible for being an obstacle to learning a target language needs to be reassessed and the view that it a taboo in language teaching and learning must also be dispelled.*

*Keywords: code-switching, sub-urban secondary school, language learning*

### **INTRODUCTION**

Code-switching is defined as the use of more than one code in the course of a speech act is a linguistic phenomenon which is becoming more evident nowadays. In a country with diverse linguistic scenery like Singapore, Malaysia, Indonesia and many others in Southeast Asia, the code-switching phenomenon is undeniably widespread as it could be said to naturally occur among bilinguals and trilingual. According to Omar (1992) the occurrence of code-switching among bilinguals or trilingual happens quite naturally in a variety of situations both formal and informal. The nature and degree of

bilingualism of Malaysians in general is unquestionable as even the national education policy to a certain extent promotes linguistic diversity for instance via the recognition of English as a strong second language. This undeniably laid the platform for Malaysians to move towards bilingualisms. In relation to this, Pennycook (1994) observes that theoretically, Malaysians can be described to possess a certain degree of competence in the English language. This is slowly becoming a fact that being bilingual in at least Bahasa Melayu (Malay language) and English in Malaysia is a common phenomenon. Moreover, Malaysia National Higher Education Blueprint (2015-2025) has mandated 'Language Proficiency' as one of the six aspirations and learning one foreign language is made compulsory for students at universities apart from mastering English as the official second language. This creates a new emphasis in the multilingual communities in Malaysia to take up and speak one more of the world's languages in their daily lives. The increase in multilingualism as results of internationalisation and mobility has enriched the teaching and learning setting of modern classrooms in many countries. There is stronger presence of the bilinguals or multilingual speakers and this created a rich linguistic ecology where code-switching thrives and become inevitable (Chimbganda & Mokgwathi, 2013). Çavuşoğlu & Bostanci (2013) emphasize on the importance of L1 in foreign language teaching as it L1 can support the managing of classroom lessons. Besides, it helps to warm up the relationship between students and teachers and provides teacher some advantages as simplification of difficult themes. Code-switching is a resource for bilingual speakers and listeners in the foreign language classroom context. It is also a tool or strategy that supports EFL teachers in teaching. Obaidullah (2016) concludes in his study that both teachers and students agree with that CS helps understand the lesson content better and facilitates learning.

The common definition for code-switching is put forth by Haugen (1956) as the alternate use of two languages. Milroy and Muysken (1995:7) added another dimension by asserting that code-switching is “the alternative use by bilinguals of two or more languages in the same conversation”. Being a bilingual or multilingual, the occurrence of code-switching is inevitable though its degree might differ according to domains. Code-switching itself is a linguistic phenomenon scrutinized and defined in many ways. Certain quarters attempted to differentiate between code-switching, code-mixing, and code-alternation. Wardhaugh (2010) defined code-switching as a strategy of using two or more languages in the same utterance with a certain purpose during a communication process. The classification of the types of codeswitching could also be based on the reasons why people switch their language. Hoffman (1991), outlines ten key functions of code-switching. They are listed as follows;

1. To talk about a particular topic
2. To quote somebody else
3. To provide emphasis about something (to express solidarity)
4. To make an interjection (by inserting sentence fillers or sentence connectors)
5. To repeat in order to clarify
6. To express group identity
7. To show intention of clarifying speech content for interlocutor
8. To soften or strengthen a request or command
9. To meet a real lexical need or to compensate for lack of an equal translation

10. To exclude others when a comment is intended for an exclusive audience

Many past studies on classroom code-switching, especially in the language classroom have been on its functions, effects and views on the practice (Lin, 2013). Ahmad (1996) in his study found that code-switching behaviors among tertiary students during group discussions are influenced by topics, purpose of discussion, and proficiency level of spoken English which happen at word and phrase level mainly for ease of expressions, quoting and elucidation. Furthermore, code-switching is able to cater to many social and academic functions of the classroom such as clarifying subject content, providing instructions, explaining, and confirming assistance (Memon, et al., 2016). Ahmad and Jusoff' (2009) confirmed that the participants in their study had a positive perception of teachers' code-switching. They pointed out that it supported the learners to have better understanding of the classroom instructions, meaning of specific words, and improve their English. Fareed, et.al.,(2016) find out that there are many reasons for switching-code in language classroom and teachers mainly code-switch to serve social and academic purposes. It also serves as a tool to assist learners in comprehending difficult terms, to provide examples from mother tongue to make the idea clear, to emphasize certain points and to give instructions. Nhi & Nhung (2020) found that code-switching was actually used a lot by English teachers in their classroom particularly assisting their teaching the most. They admitted that it provided great support for them in teaching such as helping students understand the lesson better and saving time. Kim (2015) holds the view that code switching is actually a type of teaching and learning strategy that has impact on the process of learning of content knowledge as well as learning a target language.

The use of first language (L1) in formal second language (L2) lesson is not permissible in many education system of many countries like Malaysia and Indonesia as it is negatively viewed an obstacle and not favorable to the learning process. However, Maya and Aziz (2020) in their study on the use of code switching by teachers in English class indicate that there are a lot of influential factors dictating individuals to resort to code-switching which are internal and external in nature. Studies have shown that code-switching occurs both on the part of teachers' communication as well as students communicating among themselves. Not only has this phenomenon occurred in the language classrooms but also during science and history lessons. Researchers manage to identify a list of ways how code-switching could be made to function positively in a formal classroom situation. The issue of negative perception on the use of the first language or mother tongue during lessons by way of code-switching must be reassessed as it entails many form of resistance and denials towards this ever present linguistic phenomenon of code-switching. Many researchers manage to identify positive functions of code-switching such as for language countenance and expediting of meaning during discussion language. The party with contrasting and unfavorable view of code switching perceives this linguistic phenomenon as a barrier to language learning as it serves as an obstacle to achieve the goal of mastering the target language (Norhamidah et al, 2018). The position of local teachers or educators as users of code-switching should not be neglected as they are the ones facing the challenging reality and burdened with responsibility to teach students to master language such as English to (Nordin, Ali, Zubir

& Sadjirin, 2012). Language teachers in Malaysia for instance are given new set of challenging language teaching goals such as to produce students who reach the level of native speaker (C3) as outlined by current policy based on Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) (May & Aziz, 2020). Ustunel (2016) observes from a linguistic perspective that the responsibility weighted on language teachers to teach in full English instruction classroom is more likely impossible.

The researcher anticipated that this stigma attached to code-switching particularly in the context of teaching and learning at school could be risky if the chosen subjects decided not to respond accordingly. The researcher therefore holds the view that research in this area requires careful planning. As an initial groundwork, the researcher obtained permission from the school management and consent from the respondents. This present study was then designed to utilize resorted a simple, non-intrusive, probing kind of written interview questions to gauge the openness of the subjects which will be given pseudonyms to participate in the research proper. Moreover, studies and literature on code-switching in Malaysia especially in the context of language teaching is very limited. This research will serve as a significant first step in this endeavor. This study, therefore, is to find significant information on code-switching based on the following questions. Firstly, is to find whether code-switching occur between language teachers and students at school or not. Secondly, is to find whether language teachers engage in code-switching when communicating to students at school. Thirdly, is to find what the reasons for language teachers to code-switch are. Fourthly, is to find what the functions of the language teacher's code-switching are. Finally, is to find what the situations where code-switching occur at school are.

## **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

This study was conducted via simple consensus survey ala Delphi style and written interviews distributed via Whatsapp to English language teachers at a language department of a sub-urban school in Putrajaya, a Federal Territory in Malaysia. The purposive samples comprise seven English language teachers who have teaching experience of more than 10 years and they have taught English to students at a number of schools throughout their teaching careers. The written interview questions consists of three option questions and two open ended questions with a scope that covers instances of code-switching at school, situations for code-switching and reasons for code-switching. The last open-ended question is reserved for the teachers' views on code-switching. The teachers responded via writing in the Whatsapp and also via voice notes. The responses were systematically categorized, and the voice note was transcribed. These responses were then systematically coded and analyzed based on Miles & Huberman (1994) flow model of data reduction, data display and data conclusion to identify patterns of information and themes that relate to the research.

## **RESULT AND DISCUSSION**

All the teachers indicated the presence of code-switching within their tasks as a language teacher as the phenomenon is inevitable when teaching students with various level of English proficiency and various degrees of language exposure due to the socio-

economic status of their parents. Below are the summarized findings on code-switching phenomenon between language teachers and students at the school.

### **Frequency of Code-switching at School.**

This question item quantifies the frequency of code-switching as –never, rarely, sometimes and always. Two respondents reported that they always code-switch at school. While three respondents sometimes code-switch at school. Two respondents agreed that they rarely code-switch while at school. No respondents opted for „never“ when it comes to frequency of code-switching.

### **Types of Code(s) being Switched at School.**

The study only focuses on English to Bahasa Melayu (BM) code-switching and vice versa. From the data, two teachers responded that they engaged in both BM to English and English to BM code-switching at school, interchangeably. The other five teachers only engaged in English to BM code-switching particularly when communicating in class with groups of low proficiency students.

### **Situations when Switching Codes**

All respondents generally state their instances of code-switching as centering around conducting lessons and communicating with students inside the classrooms. Two teachers specified that they code-switch from English to BM when explaining difficult words or concepts to students. Five respondents stressed that they engaged in code-switching while teaching weaker groups of students who have low English language proficiency. The breakdown of the listed situations when teachers code-switch are listed as follows based on combined examples given by each teacher;

- i- when teaching weak or low English proficiency students
- ii- when students are unable to understand certain difficult instructions or specific words
- iii- when students find it difficult to follow and understand certain part of lesson content
- iv- when explaining difficult words or concepts to students
- v- as a last resort when explaining or elaborating complex points to students
- vi- when reinforcing certain complex points while teaching to avoid confusion in students

### **Views on of Code-switching at School**

Five locations have been focused for this question namely inside the classroom (while teaching), at the corridor, school compound, at the canteen and at the staffroom. For code-switching inside the classroom all teachers responded yes in agreement to the fact that code-switching is sometimes inevitable in this domain particularly when teaching students with low proficiency level. Based on their experience of teaching, the respondents hold the view that code-switching should be allowed when necessary to cater to the following situations;

- i. When students are unable to understand the complex concepts being taught.
- ii When teaching students with low English proficiency
- iii When it is difficult to re explain or rephrase certain complex words
- iv When certain local materials or concept are difficult to be explained in English.

As for locations outside of classroom such as at the corridor or within the school compound, all respondents agreed that code-switching is permissible but they still utilize it only when necessary. Some of the reasons given for code-switching are as follows;

- i. it is outside the formal class hours and classroom area,
- ii. when weak students approach and consult you,
- iii. when conversing with other colleagues who are not English teachers
- iv. when faced with visitors at school.

Inside the teacher's room or staffroom, all respondents have the view that code-switching is permissible but they always make it a point to use English with their students when they come to get things or to consult them to enable maximum language practice for the students. Sometimes there have to code-switch when conversing with students who are not proficient in English. Some respondents also gave the reasons that they code-switch as a means of encouraging their colleagues to improve their English. There is also instances given whereby certain words are easier to describe in its original language be it English or Bahasa Melayu especially in stressing certain points during discussion or conversation. Other places within the school vicinity where respondents attested that code-switching occur are the administrative office and the school canteen.

### **Reasons for Code-switching.**

The following reasons were given by respondents when asked to justify why teachers engage in code-switching at school;

- i. Easy to fall back to the mother tongue when explaining certain complex terminology
- ii. It is comfortable to speak in the mother-tongue at common area outside of classroom
- iii. To sustain communication during lesson so that it is not halted
- iv. To make themselves understood to students with low English proficiency .
- v. To make students feel at ease especially during informal conversations.
- vi As an allowable strategy for low proficiency students to gain confidence in using English
- vi. When dealing with outsiders (e.g parents) who seem to be conversant in either one language.

From the list of reasons above, it is clear that factors such as ease of communication, being a facilitative or as support strategy, the need to ensure effective conveyance of information and the natural tendency to resort to the mother tongue influence teachers to code-switch in the school context. The concern for effective communication or the need to be understood by the community at school appears to be one of the more predominant reasons. Each of the listed factors will have to be thoroughly scrutinized in future studies to gauge the degree in which it influences teachers to code-switch.

### **Teachers' General Perceptions on Code-Switching**

All teachers in this study hold the view that code-switching is inevitable in the school context when there is still a considerable presence of secondary school students who still do not have strong command of the English language. Differences in level of language mastery in English for students are still jarring even after spending about six

years at primary schools. This is not queer as students as language learners have different learning pace, learning curve and level of exposure to English. This could also be related to the level of motivation in language learning, the types of moral support and encouragement received from parents and parents' socio-economic status. In this respect, teachers have no choice but to code-switch after trying re-explaining and rephrasing. However, many respondents also agreed with the notion that code-switching must not be encouraged to the extent of depriving students of real English language input during lessons. It should be minimized to situations where even students' effort of turning to dictionary might not be able to give them a good clear meaning to certain words or concepts. In this situation, code-switching is perceived as practical and time saving by the respondents. The respondents also asserted that for the sake of their weaker students, teachers' code switching will to a certain extent help students to get a general idea of the lesson. Due to these circumstances, teachers' discretion of resorting to code-switching to assist learning should not be simplistically viewed as taboo but seen as strategic pedagogical actions.

The findings from this research provide a significant piece of information that code-switching by teachers in the school context is not done at random but a more calculated effort dictated by a given classroom situation. All the respondents displayed the awareness and the cautious attitude that code-switching is something which should not be engaged in simply at will, rather, it has to serve certain communicative or pedagogical functions in the school context. Respondents in this study have also illustrated many accounts where code-switching is inevitable and proved to be rather practical in the given classroom situations. When it comes to technical concepts or words especially for content based topics like science and technology, the teachers admitted that the only choice is for them to code-switch to Malay language to enable the students to understand certain key words and make sense of the lessons. Time factors or time- constraints become another issue where instances given by the teachers seem to indicate that code-switching serve the function of expediting students' understanding of the lesson.

A study done by Jumal and Mohamad (2019) on the use of mother tongue by an English teacher of a suburban school mirrored the findings of this study; in terms of the similar concern for weak students' understanding of lessons, have resorted teachers to systematically use code-switching as a communication tool in their language lessons. However, this present study was able to dwell further into the cognitive factors that influence such practice by the teachers. External factors such as examination oriented culture which constantly demands for some form of good grade has also pressured the teacher to complete all syllabus content early. To expedite understanding, teachers sometimes had code-switch from time to time throughout English lessons. The findings of this study also reflect the outcomes of the study by Manara (2007) on the use of mother tongue in language classes in Indonesia. She found that some reliance of LI to assist the learning of a second language is necessary and the country's policy to prohibit the use of LI in formal L2 lesson is quite unfortunate. She postulated that a teacher could function as a good model and real communicator of the language if both the teacher's mother tongue and the students' are the same. This is because to a certain degree, the L1

is actually functioning as students „linguistic schemata“ which can be utilized in the learning of L2.

The same line of argument is also forwarded by Ooi (2017) who further asserted that the use of mother tongue in class by way of translation is a learning strategy by teachers which is actually acceptable to many students. In reality, learners (or in the case of this study, the teachers) will naturally correlate structures of the L2 or any target language to their mother tongue be it with out without instructions from teachers. The presence of a regulation against the use of L1 in class will only deprive learners of one practical language learning strategy at their disposal.

Obaidullah (2016) echoed such understanding by justifying that the use of mother tongue reduces anxiety, and enhances the affective environment for learning, takes into account sociocultural factors, facilitates incorporation of learner's life experiences and allows centered curriculum development. Due to all the prevalent circumstances above, certain quarters have boldly suggested that pedagogical approaches or teaching methodology should be devised to at least work around the natural tendency to rely on mother tongue, rather than going against it. However Ooi (2017) cautions that accommodating the use of L1 during lessons should be made through selective measures, not done at will or indiscriminately.

As a whole the findings from this study points to the reality that teachers code - switch to support teaching and learning purposes, generally with low language proficiency students and never indiscriminately as all instances indicate that they serve certain genuine communication and pedagogical purposes. This echo the findings by Mayand Aziz (2020) that teachers use code-switching only when necessary to facilitate better understanding of the English lessons.

## CONCLUSION

As a whole, this study reaffirms various observations on the linguistic phenomenon of code switching that it could be strategically utilized by teachers for teaching and learning purposes. This is especially so when there is language proficiency deficit among certain groups of learners. The teachers use code-switching strategically to ensure that English teaching and learning occurs smoothly in the ESL classrooms. The negative contrastive views on code-switching should be reconsidered as many studies have repeatedly shown that instead of being a linguistic obstacle that hamper the learning process it has facilitated the achieving the learning goals when used strategically by teachers.

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