

Code switching as Sociocultural Mediation in ESL Classrooms: A Vygotskian perspective

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Abstract

This qualitative research paper explores the perception of code-switching among the undergraduate ESL students in the multilingual classroom of English language learning using a sociocultural lens of Vygotsky. Using semi-structured interviews with eight Urdu and Sindhi students, the research investigates how code-switching functions as a mediational tool for comprehension and scaffolding, and affective regulation. Results indicate that learners strategically utilise their first language to bridge the gap in comprehension, scaffold complex grammar and vocabulary, and reduce anxiety, thereby maintaining participation and cognitive engagement. These findings are interrelated to the main sociocultural concepts like mediation, the Zone of Proximal Development, and scaffolding, challenging monolingual ideologies stigmatising the L1 use. The paper finds that the concept of code-switching is a useful pedagogical tool which helps learners in the second language to learn both intellectually and emotionally. Implications for inclusive, multilingual teaching practices are discussed.

Keywords: Code switching, ESL Classrooms, Vygotsky's Sociocultural theory, Multilingual Pedagogy, Qualitative Research.

Introduction

English is now an international language of learning, professional communication, and academic mobility. English is often learnable in the postcolonial and developing world, in the use of multilingualism, where English is taught and learned as a second language, with or without a local language or languages. This has resulted in many English language classrooms being multilingual environments in which learners use all their linguistic resources to make meaning, communicate effectively, and facilitate learning. Code-switching or alternating between two or more languages in one interactive or communicative event is one of the most striking characteristics of such classrooms. Conventionally, monolingual ideologies have shaped English language teaching in a way that only encourages the use of the target language in the classroom. In this light, code-switching has often been considered an indicator of language incompetence, incompetence or as a dependence of the learner on the first language. Policies of English only have thus been adopted extensively across most of the ESL and EFL settings on the belief that the greater the exposure to the English language, the higher the learning outcomes. This assumption is, however, increasingly being challenged by growing empirical evidence that proves that the first language use of learners can play significant cognitive, affective, and social roles in the process of second language learning (Cook, 2001; Macaro, 2005). Recent studies have emphasised the fact that code-switching is not an

accidental and unintentional act but an intentional and tactical process by which learners aim to manage their communication, control their emotions and understanding (Swain and Lapkin, 2000; Levine, 2011). In multilingual classes, students tend to use their own language to explain something or convey complex information, get help, or allay fear when speaking the second language. These practices indicate that code-switching can actually be a learning tool and not a barrier, especially where the learners have a common language.

Socioculturally, the process of language learning is inherently a social and mediated one. The Sociocultural Theory (1978) of Vygotsky focuses on the idea of cognitive development based on the interaction and mediated by the cultural tools, and language is the most potent of these tools. In this context, the first language of the learners is an important mediating factor in thinking, problem-solving, as well as in internalising new knowledge. Theoretically, the mediation, scaffolding and Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) concepts can explain how code-switching can facilitate learning through the means of bridging the gap between what a learner already knows and what he/she is trying to learn in a second language (Lantolf and Thorne, 2006). Code-switching in ESL classrooms can be perceived as a kind of scaffolding that will help the learners to participate in activities that are otherwise beyond their current language skills. The learners can sustain the participation, negotiate meaning and gradually assume control over the target language by temporarily relying on their first language. Empirical studies based on the sociocultural theory reveal that the use of strategic first-language can promote better understanding, enhance collaborative communication, and can be used to stimulate more profound thinking (Anton and DiCamilla, 1998; Ohta, 2001). These results provoke the deficit-based approach to code-switching and require a more complex approach to multilingual classroom practices. Although the use of code-switching as a pedagogical approach is gaining more acceptance, it is still a controversial topic, especially within the ESL classroom of higher education, where a high level of English proficiency is commonly required of the students. These expectations can lead to anxiety, loss of confidence and deteriorated participation. Code-switching can be used as such an effective kind of resource in such cases and assists learners to cope with anxiety and remain engaged (Krashen, 1982; Swain, 2005). Nonetheless, the issue of excessive dependence on the first language and its possible effects on long-term competence still exists. Interestingly, few studies have been conducted to investigate the self-perception of undergraduate learners towards code-switching in multilingual ESL classes. To fill this gap, the current research, based on the Sociocultural Theory formulated by Vygotsky, will explore the perceptions and learning practices of undergraduate ESL learners concerning the usage of code-switching as a learning tool. The study provides empirical evidence for the discussion of inclusive and context-sensitive multilingual pedagogies by foregrounding the voices of learners.

Research Aim

This study aims to explore undergraduate ESL learners' perceptions of code-switching and to examine how code-switching functions as a sociocultural tool in English language classrooms.

Research Objectives

1. To explore the perceptions of undergraduate ESL learners about code-switching in English language classrooms.
2. To investigate how code-switching supports learners and classroom participation from a sociocultural perspective.

Research Questions

1. How do undergraduate ESL learners perceive the use of code-switching in English language classes?
2. In what ways does code-switching function as a socio-cultural resource for learning and classroom participation?

Literature Review

Code-Switching in English as a Second Language Classrooms

Code-switching, which refers to the use of two or more languages during one interaction or communicative activity, is a widespread occurrence in multilingual classes. In ESL, the students have a tendency to recruit their first language as a tool to negotiate meaning, give expression to ideas and aid learning. Previous views about the process of second language acquisition considered code switching to be an undesired practice, which was linked to linguistic interference, incompetence or insufficient exposure to the target language (Krashen, 1982). Consequently, English-only policies took centre stage in most ESL and EFL classes.

Nevertheless, modern studies are becoming more liberal towards the ideals of monolingualism and emphasise the practical and didactic significance of code-switching. Researchers suggest that a first language can be a mental and communicative tool, but not a hindrance to learners (Cook, 2001; Macaro, 2005). Code-switching is a common practice in multi-lingual learning settings in an effort to cope with language differences and ambiguities to establish meaning and create continuity, especially where learners have a common language (Levine, 2011).

Perceptions of learners towards code-switching

Surveys on the perception of learners indicate that the students, in most cases, favourably perceive code-switching, particularly in a manner that facilitates understanding and minimises anxiety. The study by Swain and Lapkin (2000) discovered that learners employed their first language strategically when they were engaged in collaborative work in order to resolve the problems and build meaning. Equally, Brooks and Donato (1994) have indicated that the learners used the use of L1 to plan the discourse, to clarify instructions and to maintain the engagement of the tasks. Research in the ESL programs of higher education suggests that when code-switching is allowed, learners seem to be much more relaxed and ready to participate. Fear of errors or perceived negative appraisal in English may cause the fear of speaking up, resulting in silence or withdrawal (Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope, 1986). In this instance, code-switching acts as an affective provision whereby the learners are kept active and at the same time acquire proficiency skills in the English language (Swain, 2005). Inasmuch as these advantages exist, other learners are concerned about overdependency on the first language. Students have been found to understand that they have to be bilingual while at the same time maintaining exposure to English to guarantee eventual language acquisition (Macaro, 2009). This understanding portrays a subtle realisation of code-switching as a supportive yet regulated process.

Social cultural Theory and language learning

The Sociocultural Theory (SCT) of Vygotsky gives a good theoretical ground to the concept of code-switching in ESL classrooms. Vygotsky (1978) states that learning is a socially mediated process which takes place when an individual interacts with other people as well as when he or she utilises cultural tools, where language is the most important mediational tool. The cognitive development occurs initially on the social level and is subsequently internalised by the individual. In this context, the context of the first language in learners is a crucial mediator of thought, cognitive control, and facilitates learning. According to Lantolf and Thorne (2006), the development of the second language is influenced by the socially situated activity where the learners are encouraged to use every possible linguistic resource in order to create meaning. Code-switching may thus be considered to be a mediation process which allows learners to bring in the existing knowledge, besides throwing in the new linguistic input.

Scaffolding and Zone of Proximal Development

The distance between what the learners are able to do on their own and what they are able to do with the help of assistance is known as the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), which is one of the core ideas of SCT (Vygotsky, 1978). The notion of scaffolding based on this is the use of a momentary support which allows the learners to do the tasks which they cannot handle at that point in their competence (Wood, Bruner and Ross, 1976). It has been found that code-

switching serves as a useful scaffold in ESL learning. It was established that learners engaged in collaborative use of the first language to control the task performance and co-construct knowledge (Anton and Dicamilla, 1998). Likewise, Ohta (2001) established that the use of L1 helped both the comprehension and involvement in the classroom interaction, especially when learners were responding to complex grammatical constructs or new vocabulary. Socioculturally, code switching is not a negative influence on learning; rather, it facilitates internalisation in that learners can bridge the already available linguistic knowledge with the new language forms. With the increased confidence and competence, the first language dependency will reduce automatically, which is the transition from assisted to independent performance in the ZPD (Lantolf and Poehner, 2014).

Participation in classes and Multilingual Identity

The role of code-switching in classrooms is also significant in forming classroom interactions and learner identity. According to sociolinguistic studies, the multilingual learner is flexible in the use of language in context, the listeners or audience and the intended purpose (Gumperz, 1982). To achieve an inclusive and supportive learning environment in the ESL classrooms, it is possible to enable the learners to resort to their entire linguistic repertoire and ensure their active participation and interaction. Instead of considering code-switching as the manifestation of language inequality, the new studies present it as an exercise of multilingual competence and identity (Canagarajah, 2011). This view is compatible with sociocultural perceptions of language learning as a dynamic process entrenched in society. Nevertheless, although the application of multilingual pedagogies gains more and more ground, it is necessary to conduct learner-centred studies that would examine how students perceive and experience code-switching in higher education ESL settings. To fill this gap, the current research analyses the perceptions of ESL undergraduate students regarding college code-switching and how it serves as a sociocultural learning and classroom tool.

Methodology

Research Design

The research employed a qualitative research design to explore ESL learners' perception of code-switching in English language classrooms. A phenomenological approach was adopted to capture learners' lived experiences and interpretations of code-switching practices. The study was suitable within an interpretivist paradigm, which views meaning as socially constructed through interaction (Creswell, 2013; Moustakas, 1994).

Participants and Sampling

The participants were eight undergraduate ESL learners from a public university in Pakistan. All were non-native English speakers and multilingual with Urdu or Sindhi as their first language and English as their second language. Participants were selected using purposive sampling to ensure direct experience with classroom code switching. The sample size was adequate for a phenomenological study, as data saturation was achieved. Informed consent was obtained from all participants.

Data Collection

The data were also obtained using semi-structured interviews, where the respondents could share their opinions at their own discretion, although the main issues concerning the research questions have been addressed. The interviews were aimed at the experience of the learners in using English and their first language in the classroom, their attitude to code-switching, its effects on learning and involvement, and perceived benefits or drawbacks. The interviews were of reasonable length, about 30-40 minutes long and in a comfortable language to the interviewee. This flexibility allowed the participants to better describe their experiences and made them closer to the truth. All the interviews were recorded (audio) with the consent of the participants and subsequently transcribed word-for-word to be analysed.

Data Analysis

This research followed the six-stage thematic analysis model suggested by Braun and Clarke (2006) that offers a systematic, flexible, and rigorous approach to revealing and identifying, and analysing patterns in qualitative data sets. The entire analysis procedure was in six large steps, which were: (1) being familiar with the data, (2) generating initial codes, (3) searching for themes, (4) reviewing the themes, (5) defining and naming the themes (6) generating the report. The steps that are to be followed are explained in detail below, together with examples that are provided using the real answers of the participants. The main ideas of Sociocultural Theory that were used in the analysis are mediation, scaffolding, and the Zone of Proximal Development. Nevertheless, inductive derivation of themes was used based on the data to make sure that the voices of learners were central to the findings.

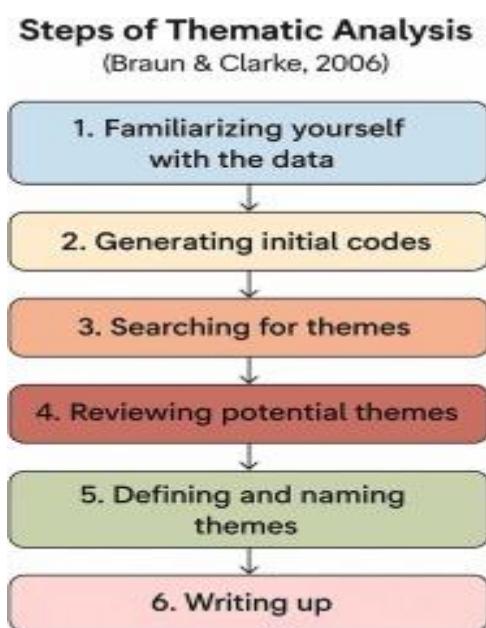


Figure 1: steps of Thematic Analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006)

Ethical Considerations

There was a prior acquisition of ethical permission before the data was collected. The participants were aware of the research's meaning, and their voluntary participation was taken care of. Anonymity was ensured by the use of pseudonyms to safeguard the identity of the participants, and their anonymity was upheld during the research process.

Result

Interpretation of data from the interviews demonstrated that the process of code-switching was socio-culturally mediated as a learning tool and not as a manifestation of linguistic impairment. This strategy of second language (English) management rather helped the learners to manage cognitive load, alleviate anxiety, and maintain engagement in English-mediated academic environments. Three interrelated result domains were identified: mediation of understanding, scaffolding in the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), and affective regulation through social interaction.

Code-Switching as a Mediational Tool

The participants kept mentioning their first language as a mediating tool to process meaning whenever English was not sufficient. This mediation helped them to keep on interacting instead of isolating themselves through communication.

Participant P1 stated:

“Whenever I cannot explain my point in English, I switch to Urdu or Sindhi so that the listener can understand what I want to say”.

Similarly, Participant P4 described:

“When I do not understand the teacher’s English accent, I wish for another language to make sure I understand the message”.

These responses indicate that learners employed code-switching to mediate comprehension and meaning-making, ensuring continuity of interaction. Rather than halting the communication process, the L1 usage enabled the learners to fill the communication gaps and be involved in classroom dialogues.

The Zone of Proximal Development Scaffolding

One of the outstanding findings was the contribution of code-switching towards the facilitation of learning in the Zone of Proximal Development of the learners. The participants said that challenging grammatical meanings, instructions, and abstract concepts were made available when mediated in L1.

Participant P7 noted:

“Grammar becomes easy when it is explained in Urdu.”

Participant P2 also recalled:

“When the tense was explained in Sindhi, I suddenly understood it.”

These quotes indicate that the learners used L1 as a temporary scaffold that enabled them to grasp concepts beyond their independent English proficiency. Code-switching enabled the learners to transition between partial knowledge and conceptual clarity as guided by mediation.

Cognitive Processing and Vocabulary Mediation

Another area that the code-switching influenced was vocabulary learning. The learners used their first language to connect new English words with the existing cognitive frameworks.

Participant P6 explained:

“First, I understand the meaning of new English words in Urdu, and then I remember them in English.”

These findings suggest that L1 served as a cognitive bridge, facilitating deeper processing and long-term retention of new vocabulary. The learners did not replace English with L1; instead, they used L1 to facilitate internalisation of English lexicon.

Affective Regulation and Confidence Building

The emotional aspect of code-switching was also noted by the participants. With L1, there was less anxiety, fear of making mistakes and communicative pressure and learners were free to be active subjects.

Participant P3 stated:

“When I get confused in English, I ask my question in Urdu so that I do not stop participating”.

Participant P8 similarly shared:

“If I speak in Urdu, I can ask more questions and continue the discussion easily.”

These responses demonstrate that code switching helped learners regulate affective barriers and sustain interaction, particularly in high-pressure academic circumstances.

Maintaining participation and expression.

Code-switching helped learners to express ideas in a better and coherent way. The learners reported that the English-only mode of communication limited the length and the complexity of their responses.

Participant P7 explained:

“When I speak in English, my answer becomes short. If I use Urdu or Sindhi, I can explain my thoughts clearly and in detail”.

This suggests that the L1 language use facilitated continuity in discourse, allowing learners to express their complex ideas which were beyond their current proficiency in the English language. Altogether, the results prove that code-switching was a socially mediated learning tool. It helped learners to cope with mental tasks, find conceptual knowledge, control emotions and maintain classroom activity. These findings make the concept of code-switching a necessary part of socioculturally mediated language learning, rather than a pedagogical obstacle.

Discussion

The results of the present study are quite strong evidence in favour of the Sociocultural Theory of learning offered by Vygotsky, which perceives learning as a socially mediated process mediated using interaction and cultural means like language (Vygotsky, 1978). The findings show that code-switching is a mediational process underpinning the ability of learners to fill the existing gaps between their existing linguistic competence and the task. Moreover, code switching as Mediations, another point of view that was highlighted by Vygotsky (1978), is the idea that higher mental functions are developed in the framework of mediated activity, in which tools and signs mediate thinking. The application of the Urdu or Sindhi by the learners is in line with this principle, since L1 was a psychological instrument mediating the understanding and the representation. Other researchers have also made similar observations; Lantolf and Thorne (2006) state that language selection in multilingualism is a tool of meaning-making and that it is not restrictive. The participants of this research did not alternate the languages in a random manner, but they employed L1 in a strategic manner to overcome communicative breaks. This contributes to the assertion of Anton and DiCamilla (1999), which states that the use of L1 in the second language learning enables a collaborative dialogue and regulation of cognition. Moreover, these results also indicate the principle of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) in which learners take tasks that they do not know how to do, and which they do with support (Vygotsky, 1978). The fact that the participants relied on L1 explanations of grammar and abstract concepts proves that code-switching was a temporal scaffolding. Similar results were also reported by Ohta (2001), who learned scaffold knowledge under difficult tasks with the help of the first language and achieved gradual internalisation of L2 knowledge. The transitional nature of L1 support was seen in the fact that grammar explanations in Urdu or Sindhi facilitated the shift of confusion to comprehension in learners in this study. In addition, the vocabulary learning that involves code-switching helps to prove the ideas of Vygotsky about the internalisation in which the external interaction with the social environment is converted into the internal processes. The learners were initially processed with meaning in L1 and thereafter switched to English, which allowed deeper lexical retention. This result is also in line with Swain and Lapkin (2000), who claim that the use of L1 facilitates the development of metalinguistic consciousness and cognitive profundity in language acquisition. As opposed to slowing down the acquisition of English, L1 mediation increased the acquisition of concepts. Moreover, the emotional aspect of learning is also acknowledged with the Sociocultural Theory. Vygotsky considered affect and cognition to be inseparable. The results of the research are evidenced in the testimonies of the participants about the decreased levels of anxiety and the boosted confidence with the help of code-switching, which proves how L1 in use mediated the management of emotions. According to MacIntyre et al. (1998), there is a chance that anxiety is a major barrier to second language communication. Code-switching in this study alleviated affective barriers, which enabled the learners to be engaged. This is in line with Brooks and Donato (1994), who established that L1 is more beneficial in facilitating emotional stability and task engagement in L2 classrooms. Moreover, within the framework of SCT, there is learning that is achieved through engagement in social activity. The results indicate that code-switching supported the active engagement of learners because it enables them to convey complex ideas and be communicatively active. As Lantolf (2000) points out, the meaning is created when learners use their entire linguistic toolkit. Language switching skills helped the learners to play a significant role in the learning process, and this fact supports the notion that multilingual competence improves learning and does not impede it. Moreover, pedagogical implications in SCT, the results dispel the ideologies of monolingual classrooms that dishearten L1. Rather, they confirm the statement of Garcicia and Wei (2014), who believe that the idea of multilingual practices can be considered a sign of cognitive flexibility and sociocultural competence. Code-switching is thus to be considered as a valid pedagogic tool in socioculturally informed language teaching. Overall, the discussion validates the fact that code-switching is consistent with the main SCT principles, mediation, scaffolding, internalisation, and socially situated learning. The results act as an addition to the literature that puts the L1

use as a dynamic resource that facilitates the cognitive and affective aspects of second language development.

Conclusion

This paper has explored the importance of code-switching in English language learning based on the Sociocultural Theory developed by Vygotsky and how the learners use their native language as an intervening tool in the academic context. The results clearly show that code-switching is not a sign of linguistic infirmity; on the contrary, it is a strategic, cognitive, and social resource that helps in learning, participating, and creating meaning. The findings indicated that the learners used Urdu or Sindhi to facilitate comprehension where English was inadequate. The process of code-switching helped learners to eliminate lexical gaps, clarify complicated grammatical constructs, and understand abstract concepts and concepts, which ensured continuity of communication. The principles of these practices depict the fundamental sociocultural rule according to which learning is mediated by the use of cultural tools, and the most potent of them is language. Moreover, the article has provided an emphasis on the use of code-switching as a scaffolding tool in the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). The students could complete different tasks even in cases where they had not mastered English on their own, given the explanation in L1 that was given by their teachers or classmates. This temporary scaffolding enabled the aspect of conceptual clarity and also aided the gradual internalisation of the English language structures, which upheld the aspect of developmental form of language learning advocated by Vygotsky.

The emotional aspect of learning also became one of the major findings. Code-switching alleviated anxiety, fear of making mistakes and communicative pressure and enabled the learners to maintain classroom participation. This reduced emotional barriers that kept the learners socially involved and communicatively active, which is critical in the development of the language in sociocultural settings. In general, the current study can be added to the expanding literature on the critique of monolingualism ideologies in second language learning. It gives empirical data that multilingualism (code-switching) facilitates learning; it helps in cognitive processing, emotional control, and socialisation. The consideration of the complete linguistic repertoires of learners is in accordance with the principles of sociocultural learning and enables more inclusive and efficient environments in language learning.

Recommendations

According to the conclusions of the current research study, a number of pedagogical and research-related suggestions are presented. To begin with, English language educators need to take a sociocultural aware stance in which they deem code switching an acceptable teaching tool and not an undesirable one. Intentional and directed application of the first language of the learners can help them in understanding, scaffolding learning and keeping them engaged in the classroom. Second, teacher training programs must include Sociocultural Theory and multilingual pedagogy that will provide educators with the techniques that they may apply in the approach to effective use of code-switching as an instructional method to explain grammar, mediate vocabulary, and clarify tasks. This will assist the teachers in striking a balance between short-term learning support and long-term language development objectives. Third, the curriculum designers must use the concept of including flexible language-use policies that enable strategic L1 use, especially in contexts where learners have a common first language. These policies can curb anxiety and encourage inclusive involvement. Lastly, future studies ought to consider the code-switching at various proficiency levels, learning settings, and language combinations to have more insight into its mediated learning. Longitudinal research might also determine how the use of scaffolded L1 reduces with increased independence in the English language among learners.

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