Code-Switching

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In a general sense, code-switching can be explained as the practice of multilingual people moving between languages or variations of languages, depending on the context. Over time, the understanding of code-switching, its mechanics and all its implications has grown and evolved.

Today, many educators agree that code-switching is an important pedagogical tool that enhances communication, aids in comprehension and the ability to make comparisons. In addition, code-switching appears to have strong evidence for creating a sense of identity in the speaker and for facilitating a positive attitude in students. Finally, code-switching is simply seen as a naturally occurring phenomenon for individuals with commands of more than one language. Yet, not everyone is in agreement; some point to its supposed encouragement of deviant language and negative habits in linguistics. At any rate, all these points can be seen in two examples of code-switching here in the United States, among classrooms with users of AAVE and of Spanglish.

To begin, it’s important to consider the very nature of multilingualism and how it contributes directly to the occurrence of code-switching. For the multilingual person, communicating with balanced or nearly balanced capacity in more than one language often naturally results in code-switching. As described by Huerta-Macias and Kephart (2009), “Learners cannot simply shut down their knowledge of one language when using the other; instead, expression is more a matter of activating the language that one wishes to use at the moment” (p. 88).
For these individuals, utilizing the practice of code-switching is both the most natural way of some expression, but it is also the most accurate. Employing more than one set of vocabulary gives greater ability to articulate one’s self with increased correctness. According to Gollan and Ferreira (2009), “When bilinguals converse with other bilinguals, they also have the flexibility of choosing whichever language most easily, uniquely, or sometimes privately expresses their intended thoughts” (p. 640). Having twice as many (or more for those with multiple languages) words at one’s disposal for a given situation or scenario would facilitate greater expression.

In retrospect, this concept of code-switching is not a new one. In 1947 George Barker sought to understand the communication of Mexican Americans in Tucson, Arizona, as one of the earliest American studies in linguistic anthropology (Nilep, 2006, p.4). A summary of his study by Nilep (2006) showed Barker’s knowledge of the use of certain language for certain settings:

Barker suggested that interactions among family members or other intimates were most likely to be conducted in Spanish, while formal talk with Anglo-Americans was most likely to use the medium of English (even when all parties in the interaction were able to understand Spanish) (p.4).

This early study showed the advantage and the flexibility for multilinguals of being free to employ either language or both.

While Barker made great contributions in his study, his research did not go unchallenged. Another linguist, Uriel Weinreich, believed code-switching was not a resource for greater expression and articulation, but a result of linguistic deficiency. As explained by Nilep (2006), “Weinreich’s description of switching codes suggested that
bilingual individuals possess two separate linguistic varieties, which (ideally) they employ on separate occasions. He suggested that frequent alternation, such as that Barker described among Tucson youth, was a product of poor parenting” (p.4). These two views accurately represent the differing opinions on the inclusion or allowance of code-switching in educational settings today.

Thus, by drawing on the understanding of how bilinguals function with access to more than one language, code-switching is seen by many educators as a tool to enhance and facilitate richer discussion within the classroom. As explained by Huerta-Macias and Kephart (2009), “the idea that both languages of a bilingual are always present makes it particularly challenging to disallow use of the native language, especially when discussing complex subject matter” (p. 89). Without it, the exchange of ideas and interaction within the classroom would be seriously compromised, and the students wouldn’t have the opportunity to give full expression to their thoughts.

Further, at times the subject matter or concept at hand is too difficult for students to grasp or to express with limited vocabulary in the L2, or the student simply feels more comfortable and more accurate communicating about a topic in his/her L1. This complexity of classroom content can best be navigated through the allowance of code-switching. In the study by Chitera (2009), mathematics classrooms were observed in order to gain a better understanding of the benefit of L1 use. Chitera (2009) explained, “Code-switching was used due to an inability of expression. In this respect, code-switching stood to be a supporting element in communication of information and therefore it was used for communicative purposes” (p. 438).
In addition, the utilization of code-switching serves to improve comprehension overall. Important connections are built during this process, as described by Maillat and Serra (2009) in that, “the use of L1 as a conceptual mediation tool in building the subject matter in L2 can appeal to the student’s practical experience in cultural and linguistic integration” (p. 204). Enhanced communication and clarification during complexities certainly point to a greater ability to comprehend the material.

Raising awareness to familiar concepts aids the process of comprehension as well, an important aspect of using the L1 in the classroom. Maillat and Serra (2009) pointed out that code-switching, “also deals with the opacity of the subject matter by making the new concepts more familiar in L2, and more salient in L1” (p. 186).

While clearing up difficult issues and creating a sense of familiarity are both important arguments for code-switching, it is also a vital tool for making comparisons. Especially when learning to use another language, Huertas-Macias and Kephart (2009) wrote that “Using the L1 provides an efficient and accurate means for analyzing semantic features of words and their appropriate use in diverse contexts in the second or foreign language” (p. 87). Through comparisons and analyzing, students gain a broader sense of the new linguistic concepts as well as the familiar.

Thus, not only are there significant reasons for the benefit of code-switching in the classroom, it is simply proven to be the more natural approach for bilinguals. Bokhorst-Heng and Caleon (2009) pointed out this important consideration in education:

However, as McKay and Bokhorst-Heng (2008) argue, the interaction between English and the other languages in a society and an individual’s speech
repertoire instead suggests the need for a pedagogy that recognises these complex and fluid ways in which languages are used (p. 235).

Thus, the most effective classroom setting is one which aligns with natural linguistic patterns and that considers the communicative needs and methods of a multilingual individual.

Thus, as a summary of the educational approach to code-switching, Tien (2009) stated, “I present three functions of codeswitching used in a classroom when talking around monolingual textbooks: it is used to explain linguistic forms, to cue classroom instructions and management, and to establish or maintain solidarity in the classroom” (p. 188). For these reasons, code-switching effectively enhances communication, comprehension and the making of comparisons, as well as reflects the most natural approach of bilinguals.

On a more personal level, the allowance of code-switching in the classroom is seen as a reinforcement of identity, of positive attitude towards learning and the encouragement of acceptance of learning. In terms of identity, the use of language is a direct reflection of the inner-workings of the student. As described by Ellwood (2008), “In any particular context or interaction, an individual’s linguistic repertoire works to negotiate toward, or away from, particular identities” (p.539). While there are many cultural or heritage identities to consider, often these identities in the classroom are simply the image of a “good student” or the overwhelmed student who creates the image of not caring, according to Elwood (2008).

In classrooms which adhere to the “L2-only” rule, the choice of language by the students reveals their identification with or rejection of these student identities. Often in
these classrooms, the teacher is not seen as one who facilitates learning, instead, “This teacher role dominates, and other identities tend to have reduced significance in the classroom” (Ellwood, 2008, p. 541). This sense of inequality often leads to frustration and detachment on the part of students.

This resistance by the students and enforcement by the teacher creates a troublesome gap within the classroom. As pointed out by Chitera (2009), “Viewing multilingualism or the use of other languages in a classroom as a problem seems likely to perpetuate the disadvantage and marginalisation of multilingual learners” (p. 437). In a classroom with a mixture of multilingual and monolingual learners, the situation of the multilinguals would be made more difficult, not because of their intellect or understanding, but because of the teacher’s methods and rules.

In addition, the refusal to allow or use L1 can leave the students unable to express themselves completely or accurately. For the reasons already covered, bilingual students have a great need to utilize both languages that are at their disposal. When they are restricted to using one language or the less-dominant language, students are made to function academically at a lower level. Ellwood (2008) described this occurrence in her study of students and explained that, “their codeswitches amount to displays of intelligence and of the capability to participate in a wider variety of ways than has been acknowledged” (p. 546).

It can be said, then, that limiting the language of students brings about more frustration in expression and also boredom towards the academic level. On a more personal note, the cultural identity of the student is at stake as well, for when the L1 is
rejected, students lose an important sense of familiarity and of building connections.

Ellwood (2008) wrote of the students in her study:

Their desire for more stimulating classes indicates that the English classes to which they are responding do not offer any links to personal interests and identities that would engage or excite them, and it also indicates that they feel they are being treated as less capable than they believe they are. (p.546).

Obviously, this sense of squelched communication, frustration and dismissal of personal identity leads to issues other than those of language within the classroom.

As noted in the studies by Ellwood (2008) and Saxena (2009), disgruntled students tend to act out and resist the educational flow of the classroom. In a “no-L1” classroom, suddenly the use of the L1 becomes an act of defiance and an aspect of classroom management - one that the students employ in order to express their unfulfilled or forced identities as well as their dissatisfaction with the classroom. In regards to the students’ use of whispered French, Ellwood (2008) stated, “In the resistive act, the student’s switch expresses a rejection of an imposed identity” (p. 545).

Further, the exclusive use of the L2 alienates the L1, making it a source of trouble and area to monitor with classroom management tactics. This casting of the L1 as an issue results in more push-back from students, serving to create an even larger gap between the teacher (the enforcer) and the students (the resisters). At times, this unnecessary tension dominates the classroom. Saxen (2009) stated:

This resistance is manifested in the form of sociolinguistic practices of L1 use (brought in from outside the classroom) for pedagogic and symbolic functions. The symbolic function of L1 use, particularly as “noncooperative” resistance, also
serves to highlight the fact that teachers, whose views are shaped by the “English-only” ideology, problematise English and, therefore, unwittingly position it as “the linguistic other” in many postcolonial contexts. (p.182).

Thus, by making English the “problem” teachers obscure important identities working within the classroom, foster negative attitudes and create resistance – rather than facilitating learning and paving the way for understanding and expression.

For these reasons, in addition to the understanding of how multilingual individuals use language, much study has been dedicated to proving the benefit of code-switching rather than making a case for banning it. Huerta-Macias and Kephart (2009) clearly stated, “the belief that use of the students’ first language in second language classes is detrimental to their second language development is not supported by the research literature” (p. 94). Yet, there are a variety of educators with differing opinions.

To begin, there is the view that bilinguals function with complete ability in two separate languages and can and should function totally in one or in the other with no crossing over. In fact, crossing is often seen as a deficiency, as stated by Chitera (2009), “There is a notion that student teachers are not able to express themselves in English and allowing them to switch to their home languages is seen to compensate for the deficiency” (p. 433).

While this idea of deficiency in using the L1 is often a myth, so is the concept of “separate but equal” in terms of one’s linguistic capacity. Bokhorst-Heng and Caleon (2009) wrote of this situation in Singapore within classrooms that are “English-only” saying, “If indeed language use were neatly compartmentalised as envisioned by
Singapore’s leaders, one could potentially conceive of ambilingualism - total competence in two languages - as a goal of language learning” (p. 249). The fact that languages are not perfectly ordered and separate gives way to the over-arching goal of effective communication.

Rather than embracing the use of code-switching as a means for effective communication, some educators regard it as troublesome. In fact, Chitera (2009) stated of her study:

In this paper, the discourse that appears to be evident is that, the mathematics teacher educators regard multilingualism and the language practices that come with it such as code-switching more as a problem rather than a resource for teaching and learning (p. 437).

This view is especially detrimental to students in their efforts to achieve within the classroom. In addition, it is not only a disadvantage to the students, but to the teacher as well who must contend with resistant attitudes and the increased need for classroom management.

Thus, the use of code-switching provides an alternative that can facilitate learning and enhance relationships within the classroom, for all the reasons already stated. In summary, Bokhorst-Heng and Caleon (2009) explained the acceptance of code-switching:

This opens up exciting possibilities for language learning and pedagogy - one that encourages a deliberate coordination between language departments in terms of curriculum and pedagogy, one that incorporates code switching, and
one supports of view of code switching as creative and resourceful rather than deficient and incompetent (p. 249).

To this end, many educators are aware of the cultural and linguistic needs of their classroom and choose to navigate the way more effectively with code-switching.

While the clear benefits of code-switching can be seen, it is also important to look at real-life examples of this concept. In the United States, there has been much attention given to the use of AAVE among African-Americans, and the need to accommodate all learners linguistically. Throughout history, the use of AAVE has been met with resistance by some educators and ardent supporters of standard English. Often, the result is a lack of understanding of AAVE and lack of competence in facilitating learning among its users. As Hill (2009) noted, "many teachers at Barrington Middle School were unprepared to effectively teach the precipitous influx of African American transfer students and assumed that their language differences correlated to minimal skills and abilities" (p. 120).

Yet, the need remains. While some see AAVE as a simple variation or deviation of standard English, the students are the ones met with great difficulty in trying to be successful in the classroom. The study by Grant, Oka & Baker (2009) described the situation for many AAVE (Ebonics) users trying to function:

Children’s use of Ebonics can interfere with their ability to understand basic reading concepts. The different grammatical and syntactical aspects of Ebonics and standard English often require Ebonics-speaking children who are reading stories in standard English to translate the text into Ebonics in their mind, and then translate it into standard English (p.123).
For these students, the English used at school is not spoken in natural discourse or in their home-settings, thus they are often confused, frustrated and dealing with identity issues – as described above for other L2 learners. While many may not consider AAVE a “true” L1, the results are consistent with other L2-learners needing to be allowed to code-switch for richer communication, greater comprehension, the making of comparisons and for a reflection of the most natural use of language.

Thus, many educators have embraced the concept of code-switching in regards to AAVE users. Grant, Oka & Baker (2009) explained:

The first strategy is to understand the history and logic behind the Ebonics that these children speak. This process will give practitioners a greater understanding of the child and may reduce biases in interactions with the child and his or her family (p.125).

With this greater understanding, the educator will be better equipped to value the AAVE user’s linguistic needs and be willing to accommodate him/her.

A key manner in which to accomplish this is to, “Never tell students that home language features are wrong and Standard English features are right. (Hill, 2009, p.130). Instead, it is recommended that the educator enables the student to differentiate between when it is appropriate to speak in one’s voice and when to give up that voice in order to submit an academic, formal paper (Hill, 2009). In doing so, Hill’s (2009) study described how the teacher would come alongside the students and assist them in creating a paper to fit the guidelines, sometimes a poem in one’s voice and other times an academic, research type paper requiring a standard approach. Thus, students were given the freedom to use AAVE in the context of their personal identity
and expression. On the other hand, students were empowered to make mature decisions about when and where it is appropriate to code-switch and how to assess situations linguistically.

Thus, in conclusion of her study on code-switching and AAVE, Hill (2009) stated, “Teachers are responsible for providing awareness of language features and students will inevitably decide what they want to say in standard and nonstandard contexts” (p. 131). To this end, educators must seek to raise consciousness to standard and non-standard as well as appropriateness for their use, creating a life-long skill for communication in students.

Similar to AAVE, students who use Spanglish face difficult circumstances in “English-only” classrooms. The mixing of English and Spanish, known as Spanglish, is a way of speaking that is increasingly common for many of students. While some see this as a deviation and impure, Sayer (2009) stated:

However it’s categorized, there is ample evidence of language mixing in almost all everyday interactions of bilingual Mexican Americans. The fusion that is Spanglish takes three main forms: borrowing words, switching from one language to another between or even within sentences, and mixing the grammar of one language with the words of another (p. 97).

Spanglish, as with AAVE, is an entity of its own, requiring the needs of its users to be considered and met.

Overall, though, there are those who reject Spanglish, citing its departure from both English and Spanish. In his study on Spanglish, Sayer (2009) wrote, “Indeed, as Spanglish has become more visible, it has also gained notoriety; it has variously been
accused of corrupting and endangering the “real” Spanish language, and holding kids back: To accept Spanglish is to condemn the kids who speak it to be second-class citizens” (p. 96). Further, Sayer (2008) stated, “Codeswitching, like other colloquial uses of language, tends to be viewed as inappropriate in the classroom. An extreme form of this deficit view of code-switching is that people speak Spanglish because they can’t speak either language properly” (p. 108). While it may be viewed as sub-par, it still needs to be considered and, like AAVE users, the users of Spanglish must be empowered to successfully differentiate between using standard and non-standard language, depending on the situation and scenario.

Further, much disagreement as to the validity of AAVE and/or Spanglish lies in the perceived definition of language. As stated by Sayer (2009), a working definition of language, not a restrictive definition, must be considered:

Sociolinguistics have long taken a descriptive, relativist view as a basic tenant:

No language is better or worse than another, and all languages are equally capable of expressing whatever their speakers need or want to express. Hence, from a sociolinguistic perspective, languages don’t “get corrupted”; they simply change (p. 96).

Through this description, the use of AAVE and Spanglish can be seen as valid means of communication for many people, not corrupt or deviations, but another method that can be resourceful and beneficial when used in certain settings.

In terms of the classroom, the use of code-switching for Spanish-speakers provides an important method of affirming cultural identity, facilitating learning and
enabling the students to be successful in their multilingual world. As stated by Olmedo (2009):

Educators should recognize that it is important to capitalize on the linguistic skills and funds of knowledge of children and community members and to build on these if they are to help children cross the borders—both the physical and metaphorical ones—that are present in their environments (p. 35).

For these students, being able to cross linguistic and cultural borders may be one of the most significant lessons of all.

As with the users of AAVE, students should be assisted in learning this important lesson - to understand when and where to use their languages. Sayer (2009) stated the importance of equipping students to function with both languages:

So it is equally important that they have the tools—the standard language—to express themselves to others outside their speech community. The local and standard varieties, then, are two registers, or different styles, and each is appropriate for a given audience and different discourses. Just as students will investigate and engage in the language of poetry, the language of math and science, and the language of music, they will also be able to handle local and standard languages. (p. 109)

In addition, the concept behind code-switching in general is consistent with the goals of any educator. Sayer (2009) stated, “Therefore, inasmuch as we subscribe to the tenet that learning is about students making personal connections and meanings around academic content, we should promote the use of Spanglish for students to explore those meaning.” (p. 109). In the spirit of exploring and greater understanding,
Sayer (2009) disagreed with the idea of two languages that are separate but equal, and instead embraced the idea of utilizing Spanish as a resource and pedagogical tool in classrooms, a reflection of the natural discourse in our society.

The challenge, then, is for schools and individual educators to embrace their vital role in the life of multilingual students. By doing so, the students are empowered and affected. Olemdo (2009) asserted:

Schools need to find ways to acknowledge this reality at the same time that they prepare children to function in the broader mainstream community of the United States. It is important for educators and researchers to consider how this can be done successfully, how classroom instruction can be conducted to help all students succeed in these schools, and how school activities can be organized so that the school does not become an “alien” community for family members (p.35).

Through intentional awareness and effort, classrooms can be a place of inclusion and celebration for differences, where all can grow into citizens capable of functioning successfully in a multilingual world.

In summary, code-switching plays a key role in this endeavor, as it serves to enhance the learning in a classroom of multilingual individuals. Code-switching does this by enhancing conversation, facilitating deeper comprehension and allowing for vital comparisons to be made by students. In addition, code-switching is a natural response for multilingual individuals, and to repress it is to bring about a variety of negative results. Among those results, studies show a confusion in identities for students, an increased tendency towards negative attitudes and issues with classroom management.
as students resist the “L2-only” approach. In applying all these points, there two examples of language users benefiting from code-switching the classroom – users of AAVE and Spanglish. These students face difficulties in the classroom and should be accommodated linguistically. In order to best facilitate learning, it is vital to code-switch and, in doing so, enable the students to live effectively as multilingual individuals.
Sources


