THE EFFECTS OF TEACHER CODE-SWITCHING ON EFL LEARNERS’ SPEAKING SKILL

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Abstract

This article presents the results of a research study regarding the effects of teacher code-switching on EFL learners' speaking skill. It was undertaken to see the relations of teacher code-switching to 1) the learners' overall oral production success, 2) their psychological comfort, 3) fluency, 4) accuracy, 5) vocabulary choice, 6) pronunciation and 7) comprehending and conveying the messages in a speaking task. A quantitative research design was used to do so. The study was conducted with 24 A2-level EFL learners in a prep-class of a state university in Turkey. To collect the data, two similar tasks, which were independent from each other, were designed for the learners. During the first task, they were instructed and guided only in English by the teacher/researcher. For the second task, they were instructed with the help of occasional code-switching to their L1, Turkish, as a supplementary strategy. To evaluate their success in two tasks, a 6-point Likert scale was used. Then the grades of the participants were analyzed via paired-sample t-test to see whether there was a significant difference between their performances in the tasks. The results suggested that there were substantial increases in the scores of EFL students in the second task during which occasional code-switching was benefited from. They had much higher scores for their overall oral production, psychological comfort, fluency, vocabulary choice, and comprehending and conveying the messages. However, the study did not show any significant relationship between teacher code-switching and students’ accuracy and pronunciation in an oral activity.

Keywords: code-switching, teacher code-switching, EFL speaking skill

1. Introduction

Code-switching has always been an indispensable part of communication in an environment with more than one language. Therefore, besides in multilingual and multicultural communities, it is commonly used in language classes as well. Code-switching is “the shift from one language to another within a conversation or utterance” (Jingxia, 2010, p. 1). In a language class, it means moving between the target language (L2) and the native language (L1). It is also called code-mixing, code-shifting, code-choice, code-swaying, or code-alternation by various linguists.

Code-switching is mainly divided into three different types: tag switching, inter sentential switching and intra sentential switching. Tag-switching refers to inserting a phrase from one language to another, such as greeting phrases or thanking phrases. They are mostly fixed structures. Inter sentential switching is seen between clauses or sentences, so the boundaries are the areas of the switches. While one clause or sentence is in one language, the next one can be in the other language. The last one is intra sentential.

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switching which occurs within the clauses or sentences and it is mostly at word level. This type of code-switching is thought to be the most complex one since it does not have a certain place in the sentence. Intra sentential switching is also named as code-mixing (Jingxia, 2010). While some of the linguists define code-mixing as a separate term; for some others code-switching and code-mixing are interchangeable terms.

Code-switching has been a controversial issue for many years among many linguists, language teachers and researchers. While some of them regard it as an effective tool to exploit the L1 of the learners in the class, others strongly defend L2-only environment to learn a language most successfully. The L2-only position started around 1880s with the emergence of Direct Method which never allowed use of L1 in class. Then the Total Physical Response followed it with the same viewpoint. They were basically claiming that using L1 in a language class would reduce the learners amount of exposure to comprehensible language input and that would affect their language improvement negatively (Liu, Ahn, Baek, & Han, 2004). Then, these views started to change with the importance of affective factors and the prevalence of humanistic and communicative approaches.

Today code-switching is still a hot topic with many different perspectives from all over the world. However, there is a lack of study in the area about teacher code-switching and its impacts on four-skills. In this respect, this research distinguishes itself from previous studies with its very specific objective about speaking skill.

This research study aims at finding out the effects of teacher code-switching on EFL learners’ speaking skill. The difference between their oral productions when they are instructed and guided only in English and when they are instructed with the help of code-switching as a supplementary strategy will be investigated. Also, a more in-depth analysis will be conducted to see the influences of teacher code-switching on the learners’ psychological comfort, fluency, accuracy, vocabulary choice, pronunciation, and comprehending and conveying the messages.

In this respect, the following research questions will be answered in the study:

1. Is there a relationship between teacher code-switching and overall oral production success of the EFL learners’ in a speaking task?
2. Is there a relationship between teacher code-switching and EFL learners’ psychological comfort, fluency, accuracy, vocabulary choice, pronunciation, and comprehending and conveying the messages in a speaking task?

2. Literature Review

2.1. Theoretical background of L1 use in language classes

The use and amount of code-switching in the classroom applications mainly depend on the method preferred by the teacher in the class, and these methods are based on the school policy or national education policy in the country. In the very past, with the Direct Method in 19th century, L1 was totally dismissed from language classes and the aim was maximum use of L2 to expose the students to that language as much as possible. Total Physical Response shares the same grounds with the Direct Method having the goal of providing the students with as much L2 input as possible (Jingxia, 2010). Then the Audiolingual Method followed the same view with a different reason. The purpose of the method was leading the learners to have native-like proficiency and it was thought that L1 use at this stage would interfere with their mastery of the L2.

During the period when the affective domains and communicative approach gained importance in language teaching and learning, L1 use was more tolerated and it was even
The Effects of Teacher Code-switching on EFL Learners’ Speaking Skill

encouraged in case of needs (Brown, 2000; p. 25). Contrary to the methods stated above, according to Interactionist Learning Theory, developed by Vygotsky, and the Natural Approach by Krashen, input is not enough on its own and it needs to be negotiated through interaction to be comprehensible for the learners. In that negotiation stage, L1 can be used as a facilitative tool among the learners and the teacher (Liu et.al, 2004). According to the Natural Approach, lowering the affective filter is also quite significant for effective learning and L1 use can help at that point. Meyer (2008, p. 148) asserts that “Comprehension of the classroom environment leads to lower affective filters. The students’ L1 can assist in making the classroom a more comprehensible place and help lower affective filters”. Being a humanistic approach, Community Language Learning (CLL) also favored L1 use to teach L2 in EFL classes. Code-switching, especially intersentential code-switching, was the main strategy of language learning in that method. Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) and Task-Based Instruction (TBI) are the methods which regard code-switching favorable, too. Both of them are based on communicative approach, and as the name suggests, the main purpose of these methods is communication. TBI supports code-switching for one more reason. In this method, product is more important than the process, and if the learners need L1 to complete the product successfully, they can use it as a supportive strategy (Cook, 1999). Similar to TBI, Content Based Instruction (CBI) is also a method based on communicative approach. It aims at teaching a subject matter and the language at the same time, and it requires students’ interaction and negotiation of meaning to comprehend the content. Therefore, during that interaction and comprehension efforts, if the students need to code-switch, they can do it. The discussion of all these methods and their basic principles show that during the classroom application, the method or approach used by the teacher has always been a strong determinant to decide whether to allow code-switching or not.

2.2. Teacher Code-switching

Code-switching is a communication strategy used by the teachers as well as the learners in EFL classrooms, and it has been asserted to have various reasons according to different research studies.

While the aim of instruction in an ESL environment is helping the students to gain a native-like proficiency in English, EFL classes do not have that mission as their short-term goals in most countries. Their objective is improving the students to be competent L2 users and code-switching is a helpful strategy to be used during that process (Sampson, 2011). Therefore, most language teachers teaching in EFL classes prefer using it. Jingxia (2010) presents that frequency of teachers’ code-switching in an EFL classroom is affected by various factors. Students’ proficiency level, the distance between the students L1 and L2, materials and content of the course, objectives, teachers’ English proficiency, and departmental policy on L2 use are only some of them. Code-switching serves teaching purposes, classroom management purposes and affective purposes based on the factors aforementioned (Jingxia, 2010; Sert, 2005; Üstünel & Seedhouse, 2005).

Teachers generally use code-switching to translate unknown vocabulary items in the class. They resort to it when the target word is too complicated to be taught in L2 or when they want to save time and energy especially in low proficiency classes. In EFL classes in which both the learners and the teacher share the same L1, code-switching is an invaluable strategy for the teachers during vocabulary teaching as it does not require any preparation time or material. Teachers tend to code-switch while teaching grammar as well. Especially in the countries where grammar-oriented exams are at the center of education and the students have lots of pressure to learn it, teachers also feel that they have to give great importance to it and teach in L1. The distance between L1 and L2 is also significant at this point. If there is a huge difference between them, such as Chinese
and English grammar, that increases the difficulty of the new grammar item for the students and it causes the teachers to switch to L1 more frequently during grammar explanations. The language sequence at these situations is usually L2-L1-L2 (Jingxia, 2010).

EFL teachers also resort to L1 while giving instructions to the students, and they do it especially when the instructions are difficult for the students to understand in L2. They can do it at the beginning of an activity or during the activity when encountered with a trouble (Üstünel & Seedhouse, 2005). Teachers prefer using L1 instructions during tests as well since test anxiety can cause the learners to miss some important points when explained in L2 (Jingxia, 2010).

Affective reasons are also quite prominent in teachers’ code-switching in EFL classrooms. These include expressing empathy or solidarity towards students and building intimate relations with them. Using L1 in an EFL classroom reduces the distance between the teacher and the students and it helps them to feel safer in the class. For example, when the students do not understand a point and feel nervous, switching to L1 and making the students feel that the teacher is with them helps to build solidarity quite well (Jingxia, 2010). As Sert (2005) also states, “code-switching helps a lot to create a supportive language learning environment”. It is also reported to be used to motivate, praise or discipline the learners. L1 is thought to be more effective for these purposes since it is more meaningful for the learners, and it can draw their attention more easily (Üstünel & Seedhouse, 2005). So, teachers make sure that their message is conveyed clearly to the students.

While it is highly supported in some countries for the teachers to code-switch in EFL classes, others totally refuse it because of their L2-only class policy. Therefore, in different parts of the world, code-switching is asserted to have different positive and negative results in classes (Ahmad, 2009; Çelik, 2003; Liu et.al, 2004). The study conducted by Ahmad (2009) in Malaysia showed that code-switching is an important tool for the teachers of low English proficiency classes. It helps the flow of their instructions and content explanations. It is also indicated that teachers’ code-switching influences the students’ affective state. They judge it as something helpful to understand the language focus more easily rather than seeing it as teachers’ inadequacy to use the L2. The students also state that the teachers’ amount of code-switching affect their success level. They feel an increase in their success when the teachers occasionally resort to L1 use in class. However, Ahmad (2009) frequently reminds in his article that although teachers’ code-switching provides many benefits in low proficiency EFL classes, it should not be seen as a method but just as a strategy that should be used only in cases of need. In another study, Fakeye (2012) openly states that code-switching is quite helpful for effective and meaningful communication and learning. Sert (2005) also asserts the same view adding that code-switching serves as a bridge from known to unknown for language learners.

Besides many positive views on it, teacher code-switching is suggested to have some negative results, too. Firstly, it can be problematic in classes in which all learners do not share the same L1 (Çelik, 2003). In that case, some of the students may feel ignored, and also miss the points stated in other students’ L1. If the teachers do not have high proficiency in the learners’ L1, that will reduce the benefits of code-switching as well (Sert, 2005). Teachers’ code-switching also affect the students’ choice of language (Liu et.al, 2004). If the teachers use it excessively, it will cause the students to start using it more frequently, and their improvement in L2 will be hindered. So, the teachers are often suggested to be careful about their frequency and amount of switching. Liu et. al. (2004) also state that there is no pre-service education for the language teachers about the
balance of code-switching although there is a need to raise their awareness and to educate them about that issue. Inserting that critical topic in their courses could help the future teachers.

3. Methodology

3.1. Participants

The participants of the study are 24 A2 level EFL students in a prep-class of a state university in Turkey. Their proficiency level has been determined based on the proficiency test, which is composed of multiple-choice format grammar, vocabulary, and reading comprehension questions, administered at the beginning of the term. 10 of the participants are male students and 14 of them are females. They are all native speakers of Turkish, and English is their foreign language. The average age of the participants is 20. Convenience sampling was used since the researcher instructed that class, and it would be practical to conduct the study with them.

3.2. Data collection

For this study, the researcher designed two different speaking tasks (information gap tasks) which were guided by cue cards and she applied them in two separate sessions which were not successive. For the first task, the students were given cue cards. One of them had key words for the questions to be asked, and the other one had some information they would use to answer their partners questions. After asking and answering questions, they were given another pair of cards, and switched roles to go through the same process again. The researcher used only L2 while giving instructions and answering the participants’ questions during that time. For the second task, the learners worked in pairs again, and they were give two version of a very similar picture. Their task was talking about these pictures, asking questions to each other on the details of the pictures, and finally finding six differences between them. During that task, occasional code-switching was used by the researchers while giving instructions and helping them with their questions. To evaluate the participants’ performances, a 6-point Likert scale was used. The scale was mainly grounded on A2 level oral assessment grid of CEFR (The Common European Framework of Reference Languages); however, some adaptations have been made for the study. While the learners were speaking guided by the cue cards, the researcher graded them in terms of their psychological comfort, fluency, accuracy, vocabulary choice, pronunciation and comprehending and conveying the messages by using the analytic rubric. Their conversations were also audio-recorded by the researcher to double-check their grades again, so that intra-rater reliability of grading would be ensured; however, their scores for psychological comfort was determined in class at the time of the task since audio recording would not provide much information about that criterion.

3.3. Data analysis

The grades of the participants were analyzed via paired-sample t-test to see whether there were significant differences between their performances in the first and the second tasks. SPSS 20.00 was used to conduct the statistical analysis.

4. Findings

In this section, findings of the study will be presented following the order of the research questions. Research question 1: Is there a relationship between teacher code-switching and overall oral production success of the EFL learners’ in a speaking task?

A paired sample t-test was conducted to see the differences between the students’ overall success in the first and second oral tasks. It was revealed that there was a statistically
significant difference between their first scores (Mean = 3.47, SD = .73) and their second scores (Mean = 4.16, SD = .58), t (23) = -5.322, p = .000 with a mean difference of .69. The Cohen’s $d$ statistic indicated a large effect size of $r = -.1046$ (Cohen, 1988) reflecting that the students were more successful in the second task which included occasional code-switching. The results can be viewed in Table 1 below.

**Table 1. Comparison of overall oral production success**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Overall success1</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>Mean difference</th>
<th>t</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>P</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Overall success2</td>
<td>4.16</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>.58</td>
<td>.69</td>
<td>-5.322</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>.000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Research question 2: Is there a relationship between teacher code-switching and EFL learners’ psychological comfort, fluency, accuracy, vocabulary choice, pronunciation, and comprehending and conveying the messages in a speaking task?

To investigate the relationship between teacher code-switching and EFL learners’ psychological comfort, fluency, accuracy, vocabulary choice, pronunciation, and comprehending and conveying the messages in a speaking task, paired-sample t-test was conducted for each variable.

**Table 2. Comparison of psychological comfort, fluency, accuracy, vocabulary choice, pronunciation, and comprehending and conveying the messages**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pair 1</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>Mean difference</th>
<th>t</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>Sig. (2-tailed)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Psy Comfort1</td>
<td>3.29</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>.90</td>
<td>-.83</td>
<td>-4.703</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Psy Comfort2</td>
<td>4.12</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>.94</td>
<td>-.83</td>
<td>-4.703</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pair 2</td>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>SD</td>
<td>Mean difference</td>
<td>t</td>
<td>df</td>
<td>Sig. (2-tailed)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fluency1</td>
<td>3.20</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>.97</td>
<td>-1.45</td>
<td>-7.669</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fluency2</td>
<td>4.66</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>.81</td>
<td>-1.45</td>
<td>-7.669</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pair 3</td>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>SD</td>
<td>Mean difference</td>
<td>t</td>
<td>df</td>
<td>Sig. (2-tailed)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accuracy1</td>
<td>3.79</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>1.02</td>
<td>-.29</td>
<td>-1.273</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>.216</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accuracy2</td>
<td>4.08</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>1.05</td>
<td>-.29</td>
<td>-1.273</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>.216</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pair 4</td>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>SD</td>
<td>Mean difference</td>
<td>t</td>
<td>df</td>
<td>Sig. (2-tailed)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vocabulary1</td>
<td>3.25</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>1.11</td>
<td>-.75</td>
<td>-3.301</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vocabulary2</td>
<td>4.00</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>.65</td>
<td>-.75</td>
<td>-3.301</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pair 5</td>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>SD</td>
<td>Mean difference</td>
<td>t</td>
<td>df</td>
<td>Sig. (2-tailed)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pronunciation1</td>
<td>3.37</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>1.92</td>
<td>-.29</td>
<td>-1.772</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>.090</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pronunciation2</td>
<td>3.66</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>.86</td>
<td>-.29</td>
<td>-1.772</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>.090</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pair 6</td>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>SD</td>
<td>Mean difference</td>
<td>t</td>
<td>df</td>
<td>Sig. (2-tailed)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The message1</td>
<td>3.91</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>1.01</td>
<td>-.54</td>
<td>-2.600</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>.016</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The message2</td>
<td>4.45</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>.77</td>
<td>-.54</td>
<td>-2.600</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>.016</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

According to the results, the participants performed significantly much better in their second tasks in terms of their psychological comfort (1st task = 3.29, 2nd task = 4.12, t (23) = -4.703, p = .000) with a large effect size of $r = -.90$; fluency (1st task = 3.20, 2nd task = 4.66, t (23) = -7.669, p = .000) with a large effect size of $r = -1.63$; vocabulary choice (1st task = 3.25, 2nd task = 4.00, t (23) = -3.301, p = .003) with a large effect size of $r = -.82$; and comprehending and conveying the messages (1st task = 3.91, 2nd task = 4.45, t (23) = -2.600, p = .016) with a medium effect size of $r = -.60$ (Cohen, 1988). Findings revealed non-significant differences between the first (mean = 3.79) and second performances.
The Effects of Teacher Code-switching on EFL Learners’ Speaking Skill

(mean = 4.08) of the learners in terms of their accuracy, t (23) = -1.273, p > .05, with a mean difference of -.29. Pronunciation scores of the learners did not significantly differ from each other as well, t (23) = -1.772, p > .05, with a mean difference of -.29.

5. Discussion

The results of this study are in line with the previous ones suggesting that teacher code-switching influences EFL students’ speaking success quite positively. As Ahmad (2009) revealed in his research study, especially in low English proficiency classes, it helps the learners to feel safer in the learning environment. It has also been affirmed in this study which showed a significant increase in the participants’ psychological comfort when exposed to code-switching by the teacher. As Ahmad (2009) and (Üstünel & Seedhouse, 2005) declare, teacher code-switching is also advantageous in order not to cause confusion in the learners’ mind. Considering that speaking practices cause great amounts of anxiety for most EFL learners (Aydın & Zengin, 2008), teachers’ occasional use of L1, which helps them to feel safer and more comfortable, is a valuable tool to be exploited while teaching speaking (Jingxia, 2010; Sert, 2005). It can be speculated based on the findings of the present study that when the students feel affectively positive, they do better in terms of fluency and vocabulary choice. Feeling safe makes it easier for the learners to continue their oral productions without the fear of making errors, and they can remember the most appropriate vocabulary item more successfully with less anxiety.

Furthermore, according to Fakeye (2012), teacher code-switching is effective and helpful for meaningful communication which is also supported in this study. The results of the present study indicated that when the teacher used occasional code-switching, EFL students’ scores for comprehending and conveying messages during a communication increased significantly which had great influences on the average success scores of the participants, too. As clearly explained by Sampson (2011), teacher code-switching helped the learners to use their oral production skills more competently.

The findings of this study did not show any significant impact of teacher code-switching on the EFL students’ accuracy and pronunciation. Although the reasons for the ineffectiveness of it for these criteria need further investigation, it can be speculated that they require longer term efforts and learning. Obviously, accuracy and pronunciation abilities of the learners are not as situation-based as the others.

6. Conclusion

The results of this study suggest that any attempt to use only L2 in an EFL class would be disadvantageous during a speaking task as it was proven in the present study that teacher code-switching has significant positive impacts on EFL students’ oral productions. It helps to improve their psychological comfort, fluency, vocabulary choice and comprehending and conveying the messages in an oral task. However, it is important to be careful about the correct amount of code-switching in order not to cause divergence from the course focuses, and the teachers should be very precise about when and to what extent to use it.

7. Implications of the Study

Based on the findings of this study, pedagogical implications will be suggested to provide new insights to language educators. The study revealed that teacher code-switching enhances L2 oral production skills of EFL learners due to its positive effects on their psychological state, fluency, vocabulary choice, and comprehending and conveying the messages. Numerous previous studies also showed contributions of code-switching to oral success of the learners (Ahmad, 2009; Fakeye, 2012; Jingxia, 2010; Sert, 2005). Hereby, it can be suggested for the language teachers that being aware of the needs of
their learners, and resorting to L1 in appropriate situations can help language learners to overcome their negative feelings and ideas about speaking in L2. So that, they can abolish the barriers in front of oral production skills of the learners and can encourage them to practice that skill more.

8. Limitations and Suggestions for Further Research

Considering the limitations of the present research, some suggestions will be covered for further research.

- Firstly, seeing the effectiveness of teacher code-switching on students’ speaking skill, this study could be replicated for reading, writing, and listening skills as well.
- Also, that study is limited with state university students. Therefore, primary, secondary, and high school learners as well as private institution contexts can be investigated in further studies.
- Finally, the research study was conducted with a small number of participants, and replicating it with large samples could yield more reliable and generalizable findings.

References