A Study of Code-switching in University English Classrooms: Perceptions of English Majors in China

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Abstract: *Numerous studies have shown that teachers' use of code-switching as a teaching strategy in the English classroom can help learners better understand and master the target language. However, learners' perceptions of teachers' use of code-switching in the English classroom remain to be explored. In this study, a questionnaire survey was conducted among English undergraduates at Zhaoqing University in Guangdong Province, China, which showed that the learners' perceptions of teachers' use of code-switching as a teaching strategy were positive, and they agreed that teachers' use of most students' native language could help them master the target language. However, it was also found that overuse of the mother tongue in the English classroom is not favored, and code-switching could be effective if it is properly used and the English expressions learned are highly culturally informative. Pedagogical suggestions are put forward in the hope of providing references for university English instruction and teaching reform.*

Keywords: *Code-switching; University English classroom; English majors; Empirical research*

1. Introduction

Code-switching refers to the complex linguistic phenomenon in which speakers use two or more languages simultaneously or alternately in the process of conversation, which involves a variety of factors such as linguistic, social, cultural, cognitive, psychological, etc., and has aroused extensive attention in various related research fields (Poplack, 1980; Gumperz, 1982; Trudgill, 1986; Milory & Muysken, 1995; Auer, 1998; Verschueren, 1999) [1][2][3][4][5][6].

Code-switching in the classroom refers to a teaching strategy in which teachers systematically switch between the target language and the first language to help learners understand the target language. Language and pedagogical researchers are divided on whether teachers should use code-switching in the foreign language classroom. On the one hand, learners master the target language in the process of language acquisition by continuously receiving stimuli from the target language and responding to these stimuli. Therefore, teachers should use the target language rather than the native language as much as possible in foreign language classroom teaching, thus providing students with more opportunities to communicate in the target language (Cummins, 1992; Turnbull & Arnett, 2002)[7][8]. On the other hand, the other school of thought believes that code-switching is a natural response produced by teachers and students in the foreign language classroom, and that excessive avoidance of the use of the mother tongue is not in line with the communicative principle and limits the flexibility of language teaching. Appropriate and appropriate use of the mother tongue in the classroom can not only effectively avoid ambiguity in the target language, but also maximize learners' understanding of the target language. In a code-switching environment, language learners can better cooperate and interact with the teacher (Atkinson, 1987; Cook, 2012) [9][10].

Code-switching, as a speech mechanism that promotes language acquisition and development, can be used in classrooms to promote students' language learning. Fang & Zhang (2005) found that code-switching is common in English classrooms in China, and the use of Chinese is essential to explain English knowledge [11]. Chen (2004) found that teachers' use of most students' mother tongue would help them to learn and express themselves better in English [12]. Yan (2017) conducted a questionnaire survey on students of Science and Engineering as well as those studying Liberal Arts at the same institution, and found that both freshmen and sophomore students had a positive attitude towards teachers' code-switching [13]. Zhu (2022) argues that the frequency of code-switching is subject to different lesson types

and different teaching tasks [14].

There seem to be few empirical studies on code-switching in the English classrooms in China; in addition, as students are the subjects of classroom learning as well as the recipients of teachers' instruction, it is crucial to understand their perceptions of teachers' use of code-switching. This study explored the perceptions of English majors towards teachers' use of code-switching in the English classroom by means of a questionnaire, and put forward a series of pedagogical suggestions, so as to help university English teachers to effectively use most learners' native language in promoting English instruction and learning.

2. Research Method

The target of this survey is English majors in three classes with a total of 144 students at Zhaoqing University in Guangdong Province, China. The average age of the students surveyed was 19.5 years, with the oldest being 22 and the youngest 17. All the students have more than 8 years of English learning experience. Before distributing the questionnaires, the researcher explained the meaning of code-switching to all of them.

The research instrument for this survey was a self-administered questionnaire and it aims to investigate the following questions:

1) What is the current situation of code-switching in university English classrooms?

2) What are the functions of code-switching in university English classrooms?

The first question is addressed by investigating students' perceptions of teachers' use of code-switching in the English classroom, as well as the impact of code-switching on three aspects: understanding and intake of English expertise, teacher-student relationships, and classroom climate. The second question draws on the functions proposed by Liu (2020) [15].

The questionnaire was modified after a pilot study with 10 students, and 10 questions were finalized, including 6 single -choice questions, 1 multiple-choice question and 3 open-ended questions. For single-choice questions, a 5-point Likert scale was used to score students' agreement with statements about code-switching: 5 for "strongly agree," 4 for "agree," 3 for "no opinion," 2 for "disagree," and 1 for "strongly disagree." The maximum score for each question is 5 points and the minimum is 1. The questionnaire was distributed to 144 students in 3 classes and 140 questionnaires were valid.

3. Research Method

The following survey results presents statistical analyses of 6 single-choice questions, 1 multiple-choice question, and briefly summarizes the advantages, disadvantages, and suggestions for code-switching answered by students in response to open-ended questions. What follows is a discussion of the results of the survey.

3.1. Survey Results

Table 1 shows the questions investigated and the results of the statistical survey.

For Question 7, the functions that the students chose with a percentage of more than 50% were "Translation", "Economy Saving", "Maintaining Classroom Discipline", "Emotional Function" and "Checking Comprehension". The function with the highest percentage was "Checking Comprehension".

A few common answers to Question 8 are listed below.

"The use of most students' mother tongue can better clarify the requirements of classroom tasks and help them to accomplish the tasks effectively."

"I can do better when the teacher tells me in Chinese what activities are to be done in class and what is required for homework or tests at the end of class."

"It is more effective in explaining new vocabulary, phrases, and idioms in the native language of the majority of the students."

"I can learn better in code-switched English classrooms than in all-English classrooms."

"Code-switching has a positive effect on interpersonal relations between teachers and students."

There are three common answers to Question 9.

"Teachers who overuse code-switching make me feel like I am not learning anything."

"Using too much Chinese has bad effects on English learning."

"Excessive use of Chinese does not lead us to think and reason in English."

For Question 10, there are four common answers.

"Avoid the overuse of code-switching."

"English learning is only as good as the proper use of code-switching."

"Courses in professional knowledge can use more code-switching, and courses in listening and speaking need less."

"If the English expressions learned are highly culturally informative, it is more effective to explain it in Chinese."

Table 1: Questionnaire results

	Question	N=140
1	Do you agree that teachers use code-switching in the English classroom?	Mean: 4.55 Standard Deviation: 0.71
2	Do you think code-switching can improve comprehension and facilitate English learning in the English classroom?	Mean: 4.42 Standard Deviation: 0.80
3	Do you agree that code-switching enhances your understanding and intake of English expertise?	Mean: 4.56 Standard Deviation: 0.52
4	Do you agree that code-switching fosters teacher-student relationships?	Mean: 4.22 Standard Deviation: 0.41
5	Do you agree that code-switching improves the classroom atmosphere?	Mean: 4.10 Standard Deviation: 0.60
6	Do you agree that teachers use code-switching frequently in the English classroom?	Mean: 3.50 Standard Deviation: 0.83
7	Do you think why teachers use code-switching in the English classroom?	(1) Topic Switching: 7.8 % (11/140) (2) Translation: 81.4% (114/140) (3) Economy Saving: 77.1% (108/140) (4) Maintaining Classroom Discipline: 66.4% (93/140) (5) Emotional Function: 74.2% (104/140) (6) Checking Comprehension: 86.4% (121/140)
8	What are the advantages for teachers to use code-switching in the English classroom?	open-ended question
9	What are the disadvantages for teachers to use code-switching in the English classroom?	open-ended question
10	What suggestions would you give teachers about using code-switching in the English classroom?	open-ended question

3.2. Discussion

In table 1, the mean of showing students who agree that code-switching enhances their understanding and intake of English expertise is 4.56, the mean of showing students who agree that code-switching facilitates the teacher-student relationship is 4.22, and the mean of showing students who agree that code-switching improves the classroom atmosphere is 4.10. The answers to the open-ended questions, by and large, indicate that code-switching has a positive effect on students' English learning. The findings are highly consistent with Ahmad & (2009) who noted that teachers' code-switching can help students keep up with the teacher's instruction and actively participate in classroom questioning [16]. Rolin-Ianziti & Varshney (2009) also stated that teachers always use learners' mother tongue when creating positive teacher-student relationships and a harmonious classroom atmosphere [17].

Teachers and learners use code-switching for a variety of reasons (Polio & Duff, 1994) [18]. According to the answers to question 7, "Translation", "Economy Saving", "Maintaining Classroom Discipline", "Emotional Function", and "Checking Comprehension" are the primary functions that students think teachers use code-switching in the English classroom, and they are all favored by more than 70% of the students. Although it is not possible to fathom from the questionnaire what factors influence the use of code-switching by teachers in the English classroom, it is inferred that it is due to the following factors based on the findings of the functions mentioned above:

Code-switching is caused by the content of the instruction. Many specialized courses (e.g., Linguistics and Literature) cannot be explained directly in English or are more pedagogically effective when explained in the native language of most students.

The level of students varies. Students have varying levels of English proficiency and teachers have to cater for every student, hence the use of code-switching.

Code-switching is caused by the teacher's personal considerations. Teachers are of varying standards and have different views on teaching methods. In addition, the use of code-switching can promote the relationship between teachers and students and facilitate classroom management.

English learning environment influences the use of code-switching. English language teaching in China is EFL, not ESL as in English-speaking countries. In daily life people almost use Mandarin or their own dialects to communicate without using English. Many large-scale English exams do not assess "speaking", so teachers and students do not pay much attention to speaking English. As a result, teachers will also naturally use code-switching.

As can be inferred from one of the common answers to Question 8, an all-English classroom does not seem to be popular. Levine (2003) argues that the use of the target language can limit the effectiveness of classroom instruction [19]. Cook (2001) also maintains that the exclusivity of teaching the target language in the classroom greatly limits the possibilities for language instruction [20].

As can be seen from one of the common answers to Question 9, the students surveyed seem to disfavor the excessive use of code-switching as it could lead them to learn nothing. It is well known that excessive code-switching tends to create anxiety in students that prevent them from receiving and learning the target language. Although the questionnaire did not address what percentage of code-switching in class should be appropriate for teachers to use, the mean of showing students who agree that teachers use code-switching frequently in the English classroom is 3.50, much lower than the mean obtained from the other questions. It is worth noting that from the two common answers to Question 10, it may be the learning material that influences students' perceptions of code-switching, rather than the amount of time it takes to use it.

4. Pedagigical Implcations

It is recommended that teachers pay attention to the following two suggestions when using code-switching in the English classroom based on the results of the survey: (1) Teachers can use code-switching according to the content of the lesson, for example, when explaining new vocabulary, phrases, idioms, and highly culturally informative expressions. Code-switching can also be used to reinforce teacher-student bonding or to activate the classroom atmosphere. (2) Teachers should not overuse code-switching to prevent learners from receiving and learning the target language. Overall, code-switching can be used appropriately when students have difficulty in understanding the learning materials, or when they have low motivation, thus promoting the efficiency of English teaching and learning.

5. Conclusions

The study explored 140 English students' perceptions of teachers' code-switching in the English classroom at Zhaoqing University in Guangdong Province, China. The findings showed that students are positive about teachers' use of code-switching in the English classroom, and they agree that code-switching is positively associated with better acquisition of English knowledge, sound teacher-student relations and a harmonious classroom environment. Nevertheless, overuse of code-switching in the English classroom has negative effects. The study concluded with pedagogical suggestions for teachers to use code-switching and shed light on empirical research on code-switching in China.

The study has limitations. On the one hand, it is a small-scale sample survey and thus the

generalization of the findings has yet to be verified. On the other hand, the questionnaire survey needs to be more detailed and complete to specifically reflect the students' perceptions of code-switching. In the future, it is possible to design a large-scale survey of students' perceptions of code-switching and to expand the scope of code-switching surveys. In addition to the questionnaire survey, a variety of research methods can be applied, such as direct interviews, classroom observations, and surveys of English teachers' perceptions of code-switching.

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