How Does Code Switching Affect Students‟ Proficiency When Learning Foreign Languages?

Susan Córdoba Huertas*

cordobahuertas@gmail.com

Abstract

This qualitative case study attempted to understand how code switching affects students' ‟proficiency level when learning foreign languages at a public university in Colombia. The participants were seven English intermediate- level students from the foreign language program.

Findings revealed that code switching affects students consciously and subconsciously while speaking a foreign language. Their speaking skills were affected consciously due to the lack of vocabulary; and subconsciously because of the environmental situation they were in when communicating (in public, due to nervousness and the pressure they felt when speaking in front of the teacher and being orally evaluated.)

Key words: Code Switching, case study and communicative skill.

Resumen

Este estudio de caso cualitativo pretendió comprender como el cambio de código afecta el nivel de competencia oral de los estudiantes, en el aprendizaje de lenguas

extranjeras, en una universidad pública en Colombia. Los participantes de este estudio fueron 7 estudiantes pertenecientes al nivel intermedio del programa de lenguas extranjeras.

Los resultados revelaron que el cambio de código afecta a los estudiantes consciente y subconscientemente mientras hablan y se comunican en una lengua extranjera. Las habilidades orales de los estudiantes se vieron afectadas conscientemente debido a la falta de vocabulario para expresar sus ideas y subconscientemente por las situaciones y lugares en las que se encontraban al comunicarse. (En público, por el nerviosismo y la presión que sentían al hablar en frente del profesor y ser oralmente evaluados).

Palabras clave: cambio de código, caso de estudio y habilidad comunicativa.

Introduction

Foreign languages learners face several challenges when communicating orally. The most common ones are: mispronunciation, incorrect grammar structure, word choice and also code switching. Code switching is defined as "the transference of elements of one language to another at various levels including phonological, grammatical, lexical and orthographical (Berthold, Mangubhai & Batorowicz, 1997.) There are several factors that make foreign languages (FL) learners code switch, consciously or subconsciously, from one language to another at different levels. However, learners are not always aware of the causes that make them code switch. Consequently, the purpose of this study was to understand whether code switching affected students" oral skills positively or negatively when learning foreign languages. Although code switching may occur when writing, this study was primarily focused on the participants" communicative skills.

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Literature review

In order to develop this research, I have chosen three previous studies in order to complete the literature review. I found these three studies helpful because they show the advantages and disadvantages of code switching when learning foreign languages.

(Unamuno 2008) conducted a study called "Multilingual switch in peer classroom interaction." Findings showed that code switching opens sequences aimed at planning, organizing and structuring the discourse and the activities students are sharing when expressing themselves. Similarly, code-switching sometimes shows an alteration in the arrangement of participants, i.e. a shift of receiver, the incorporation of a new interlocutor, etc.

Similarly, (Macias 1992) studied "Code-Switching, Bilingualism, and Biliteracy". The author focused on a single classroom because there was more code-switching occurring in this classroom. Participants were 30 students, including their parents and teachers.

Data for this investigation comes from approximately fourteen hours of videotapes taken in this classroom, observation notes by a participant observer (teacher) and non-participant observers (project coordinators), informal parent interviews, and work samples done in the classes and at home. Findings revealed that students used code switching to elaborate, to emphasize, to specify an addressee and to clarify; the instructor code switched effectively and in the fashion of a native bilingual (excluding a few performance errors in grammar which did not detract from the message); and parents maintained their use of Spanish in the classroom even when they were capable of speaking English. This was true,

with the exception of short phrases, when they spoke to the instructor (who was English dominant). Macias (1992) "also found that children used both languages freely as they responded to the teacher. Code-switching was found to enhance communication, in both oral and written form".

(Olcay Sert 2005) conducted a study on the functions of code switching in ELT classrooms. This author concluded that: "It may be suggested that code switching in language classrooms is not always a blockage or deficiency in learning a language, but may be considered as a useful strategy in classroom interaction, if the aim is to make meaning clear and to transfer the knowledge to students in an efficient way. Yet, it should be kept in mind that in long term, when the students experience interaction with the native speakers of the target language; code switching may be a barrier which prevents mutual intelligibility.

These studies helped me to better understand how code switching could affect students while speaking and communicating their ideas in a foreign language. I have also learned that code switching affects positively or negatively students' oral skills.

Methodology

This study followed qualitative research procedures; especially the ones framed under a case study. According to (Creswell 1998) a case study is as "an exploration of a bounded system" or a case (or multiple cases) over time through detailed, in-depth data collection involving multiple sources of information rich in context. This study was bounded in time because it lasted 14 weeks. It was also bounded in space, since this research studied seven English intermediate - level students.

I used purposeful sampling to select the participants to take part in this study, taking into account the following criteria: willingness to participate and students that interacted/participated the most in their English classes. According to (Patton 1990) "the purposeful sampling is to select information-rich cases whose study will illuminate the questions under study".

The participants for this study were seven English intermediate-level students of the foreign language program at a public university in Colombia. Their ages ranged between 17-19 years. (Participants were: Mariana, Estefanía, Pablo, Carlos, Andrés, Ramiro and Clara (Pseudonyms)).

Their proficiency level was B1 according to the common European framework. They were fully informed about the project, and the reasons why the project was being conducted. They expressed their concerns about the research and their doubts and questions were answered.

Data was gathered in a natural setting, in a foreign language classroom at a public University in Colombia. Classes were developed in a classroom with two big, transparent windows. The classroom was well lit providing students with a pleasant learning environment.

The sources of information used were six non- participant classroom observations and three interviews. According to (Creswell 2005) a non-participant observer is someone "who visits a site and records notes without becoming involved in the activities of the participants" (p.212.) Interviews and classroom observations were video-taped and transcribed to not miss relevant information about the phenomenon under study. For the

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classroom observations I played an unobtrusive role, in order to be unbiased when conducting the research.

The observations were conducted in a FL classroom that had two big, transparent windows which could have presented a distraction for students; however the organization of the classroom and its setting arrangement helped students to better understand what was being taught. Students usually organized themselves in a semi-circle except for when they had exams and they had to organize the chairs in several rows.

The classroom observations lasted two hours each time. I focused on the students that participated and talked the most to get the information needed for the data analysis. During the process, a particular protocol was used (see annex 1) which describes date, classroom observation number, class, time, teacher, observer, site, focus and reflection on my insights. More importantly, I set an objective for each classroom observation in order to gather specific information of the phenomenon under observation. The objectives of each classroom observation were fully accomplished and they were helpful when analysing the information of the study. I also wanted to observe the students' reactions towards oral activities guided by the teacher.

Data was also gathered through three semi-structure interviews. Semi-structured interview protocols (see annex 2) complemented the data collection process through "a structured but flexible process" (Turner, 2010.) Because I wanted to gather more information about the phenomenon being studied, from the participants' voices, taking into account their opinions, thoughts and answers towards the questions asked. Participants were interviewed three times starting on June 19th, then on July 9th and finally July 18th. I

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carried out these interviews in a quiet and peaceful place where participants felt

comfortable.

Description of the Setting

The classes I observed did not have a specific sequence when developing them

(beginning, development and closure). The teacher in charge of the classes, most of the

time started her classes by revising students' homework related to the previous class, and

then she introduced the new topic for the class by asking students some questions, that they

had to answer orally. The teacher usually ended by explaining to students what they had to

do for the next class or by assigning new topics for some oral presentations.

Data analysis

The data was analysed following the interpretive analysis suggested by (Hatch

2002.) Using MAXQDA software was very helpful in order to analyse the information

previously gathered. The data were coded and reduced to 2 themes to better understand and

organize the findings.

Ethical considerations

Before starting the data collection procedure, I previously contacted the teacher in

order to get her permission through a formal letter which contained the title of the project,

and the observation and interview schedule planned for each one of them. The letter of consent aimed to guarantee the confidentiality and objectivity of the information. Moreover in the first classroom observation I explained to the students what the project was about, its purpose, its advantages, and the implications it would have in their learning process. Students' doubts and questions were answered. Those students who wanted to participate in the study did it voluntarily. Participants' real names were changed by Pseudonyms in order to protect their privacy and anonymity.

Findings

Once data was analysed, two themes emerged reflecting how code switching affected students when communicating orally. Findings will be presented in the light of the conscious and subconscious process students went through when speaking.

I found that the students code switched consciously from one language to another because of the lack of vocabulary and expressions they might need when speaking. That is to say, they either do not have enough vocabulary, or do not remember the appropriate words to continue speaking. On the other hand, I found that students did not only code switch consciously because of the lack of vocabulary, but also because some words in the other language have a stronger meaning and help them to emphasize an idea or opinion and to better express themselves when communicating. Additionally they code switched due to the lack of interest in the topics assigned by the teacher or the ones from the book New English File. For instance; when the teacher asked Mariana:

"Are you a risk taker?" she immediately answered "yes, I am" to which the teacher replied: "tell us more, explain why"…

"Well. I love to explore new things… mmm things, like, eeeh… tengo la idea pero no se como decirlo. Mmm something like, experimenting new emotions in my life, because it is good to "ser capaz de" to do things you have never done before."

When conducting this classroom observation I realized that some students wanted to participate in the oral activities. However, due to the lack of vocabulary they experienced fear of running out of words when they started talking. On the other hand the topic was not interesting enough for some others, because it was a topic from the book and not a free theme to talk about. For the teacher it did not make any difference whether the students liked the topic or not. During a class observed, I noticed that the teacher did not pay too much attention to how students code switched; she seemed to be aware of the fact that they code switched because they wanted to make themselves understood in one way or another. In my personal opinion, it would have been better if the teacher had used some role plays, debates or round table discussions in order to give students an opportunity to talk more or get orally involved in the class, because sometimes students did not talk and did not express their thoughts and opinions due to the lack of interest in the topics and the classes in general.

My insights were supported by what Estefania stated: "ay no que mamera este tema, que clase tan aburrida." To this statement Clara replied:

"este semestre las clases y las actividades han sido muy aburridas, ya casi ni hablamos en inglés, falta mas creatividad por parte de la profesora, la mayoría de las actividades que hacemos son de acuerdo a lo que esta en el libro."

Likewise, they expressed their concerns about the oral activities that the teacher used to enhance oral production. The oral activities were few and they did not have enough opportunities to express what they wanted freely. As they did not agree with the activities they spoke in Spanish and not in English, and they felt uninterested in talking about something they did not like and that was taken from the book New English File.

For example, during an interview, Pablo stated that the topics for the oral activities were essential to get them interested in talking and sharing their likes and dislikes. As he said: "Pues a mí me gusta mucho trabajar la parte de "speaking" pero la verdad siento que no he podido porque las actividades de la profesora no se acomodan a ello."

When one of the participants was asked about his level of comfort when expressing his ideas, opinions and other oral activities in front of the teacher or classmates, Carlos agreed that he loved speaking in English but sometimes he ran out of vocabulary to continue talking and communicating his ideas. As he stated:

"Personalmente me gusta mucho hablar en inglés, pero a veces me quedo sin palabras para expresar lo que pienso y esto es un poco incomodo… pues hay momentos en los que uno habla, y pues bien y como que si fluido y tal que no sé qué, pero muchas veces uno amanece como troncado de que juemadre hoy estoy pensando en francés hoy estoy pensando en español no se me viene ninguna palabra o cruzo las dos lenguas, o sea es complicado, según la situación".

From this answer I can infer that although students loved speaking in English they sometimes did not know how to communicate without having to switch to make themselves understood. Code switching in this case substantially affected them because it was constraining them from talking. I realized that when students did not want to talk because of their fear of mixing two languages together, it represented a disadvantage for them because instead of helping and making them talk; it constrained them from talking and expressing their ideas, concerns, and thoughts.

All in all, I realized that some students hesitated when the teacher unexpectedly asked questions and they had to answer them orally. I noticed that they were indecisive because some of the topics such as: taking risks in life and oral sentences about conditionals was not an interest of theirs to talk about. In addition when students answered questions their lack of vocabulary constrained them from speaking. As a matter of fact, a few of them started talking and were unable to continue with their ideas. Some others were talking in Spanish about their daily life with their classmates and others were just yawning and looking at the watch on their wrists. This shows that they were neither interested in speaking in English nor paying attention to the topics being taught.

I also found that when students communicated orally in a foreign language, they subconsciously code switched. In doing so, they displayed nervousness, fear and lack of confidence when trying to find the appropriate words to talk about a particular topic. It seems that the subconscious code switching was caused due to the environmental situations participants were in, for instance, when being orally evaluated by the teacher, or judged by classmates.

It can be concluded that some of them did not even realize that when speaking a foreign language they used words or expressions from another language different from the one they were supposed to speak in. I found that they subconsciously code switched because they were not able to identify the code switches they went through while speaking in front of an unfamiliar audience. Foreign language learners also code switched subconsciously because of what they displayed while being observed. They realized afterwards, or when their classmates or teacher made them aware of it. As Andrés said:

> *"en el evento de francés fue un oso horrible porque tanto Sirena como yo cometimos errores gramaticales, de conjugación y de pronunciación pero fueron cosas como de nervios, por sentir la mirada de tantos estudiantes y todos los profesores, entonces fueron terribles yo me sentí (jajajjajaj) que vergüenza, ni siquiera me daba cuenta cuando decía cosas en Inglés te lo juro como que huyy que pensaran los profesores de uno, ya después de que las había cagado. Que uno está en cuarto y cometiendo esos errores. De primero, de primer semestre, entonces fue horrible, si claro obvio los nervios y ante el público es complicado entonces no se yo creo que quede como troncado ahí como que heyyy, pero igual seguí hablando porque que mas".*

According to participants' answers and the classroom observations I conducted, participants felt under pressure when they had to talk in public and do oral presentations because the teacher was taking notes about their performance, and what they were saying almost all the time.

For instance:

"La profesora toma nota de todos los errores en una hojita y es feo porque uno está mirando que escribe y escribe… y uno como que huy!!! Lo estoy haciendo remal, y se le salen palabras en la otra lengua y cuando salgo como que : no… porque dije esto en "Ingles" cuando era en francés o como que…Huy no que feo pero ya que puede hacer uno"

When I asked participants the reason behind the pressure they felt when communicating in a foreign language in public or in front of the teacher they answered as follows:

"Por ejemplo con los parciales orales uno ya está como juemadre esto es en serio y me tengo que sacar buena nota. Pues a mí me sucede que me sale una pregunta en un oral y siento como si no supiera Inglés Francés (jajajaajaja) y termino diciendo todo en las dos lenguas y nada que ver, a veces la profesora hace caras pero, uno como que perdón teacher, pero si uno esta dando el punto de vista, solamente es como relajao, no pasa nada."

I can infer that they felt under pressure because of their grades; and their commitment to succeed, different from when they are just giving opinions and having the freedom to express their ideas. I also asked them for specific situations in which they code switched while speaking and Ramiro answered:

"Eee…pues no sé, a ver…mmm… (pausa) yo tenía que decir "c'est ne pas difficile" en el evento de francés y termine diciendo "it's not difficult" porque no recordaba bien las palabras, además tenía el micrófono en la mano, todos callados y poniéndome cuidado, no… fue muy feo, sentía que estaba frio y rojo de la pena.

Algunas palabras las decía con acento en inglés sobre todo esas que terminan en tion, no las decía como terminan en francés, huy no que oso".

This demonstrates how participants code switched subconsciously; Ramiro did not know that he had code switched until he watched the videotape at the end of the event.

Conclusions and pedagogical implications

Taking into account these findings, I realized that code switching affected students consciously and subconsciously depending not only of the lack of vocabulary but also on the environmental situations they are in, the topics they have to talk about, the different oral activities in which they take part, and the pressure they feel when being orally evaluated. Conscious or subconscious code switching is advantageous for FL learners; they use code switching in well-structured and short sentences while speaking. When being immersed in the classroom I found that code switching allows students to make themselves understood by others. However code switching can only be an advantage when it does not constrain students from talking, because when it does so, it clearly represents a disadvantage for foreign languages learners. Findings of this research could benefit not only FL teachers; but also students who feel ashamed when they code switch from one language to another, regardless of if it is only one word or a short sentence. Moreover, it should be taken into account that code switching cannot be the only strategy to make students talk in every single oral activity developed by teachers; neither can it be used as the only way to improve students' proficiency level when learning foreign languages. I also found that code switching represents a disadvantage for students when it constrained them from speaking

for their fear of running out of words when expressing themselves and using code switching as the only mechanism to continue talking.

In a way, these findings coincided with what Macias' 2002 study revealed about students who used code switching "to elaborate, to emphasize, to specify an addressee and to clarify". Macias' findings are related to my results because I found that code switching allows students to communicate their ideas, opinions and thoughts more effectively even when they mix the two languages together.

Recommendations for further research

Researchers, who might want to further on these findings should consider:

1. Conduct more than six classroom observations and interviews. This would provide researchers and the foreign language community with more solid findings that would allow a better understanding of the phenomenon under observation.

2. Interview the teacher in charge of that particular setting in order to get more information about their reactions and insights towards the use of Code Switching in the classroom while communicating orally.

*Susan Córdoba Huertas, is a Bachelor's Degree student of Foreign Languages English and French at the Universidad de Pamplona, Colombia. She is currently in her 5th year. She has been a member of the undergraduate Research Group SILEX for 2 years. She is interested in conducting studies that involve FL learning and teaching experiences. She can be contacted at cordobahuertas@gmail.com

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ANNEX N°1

Observation Protocol

Observation N°: ___
Teacher: _____
Observer: __ _____
Subject: _____   Date: _____   Hour: _____
Site: _____   Number of students: _____
Focus _____

1. objective: _____
_____
_____

TIME	WHAT I OBSERVED	MY REFLECTIONS

ANNEX 2

ENTREVISTA N° 1

Date:_____Hour :_____Site:_____
Focus:_____
Subject:_____
Objective :_____
Interviewee:_____
Interviewer:_____

Las siguientes preguntas tienen como fin recolectar información a cerca de la experiencia de los estudiantes, cuando aprenden inglés-Francés además de ello, saber como se sienten los estudiantes de 4 semestre cuando ponen en práctica las 4 competencias que se requieren al momento de aprender una lengua extranjera. Las mismas se realizan con el fin de dar respuesta a la pregunta del proyecto "HOW DOES CODE SWITCHING AFFECT STUDENTS' PROFICIENCY WHEN LEARNING FOREIGN LANGUAGES?"

La información que usted proporcione en esta entrevista será utilizada únicamente para la colección de datos del estudio previamente citado. Mi interés es aprender de sus experiencias. Todos los comentarios y sugerencias de todos los participantes serán manejados con profesionalidad y confidencialidad.

Ahora siéntase libre y cómodo de responder al siguiente cuestionario. Le agradecería su completa sinceridad.

CUESTIONARIO.

1. Cuando usted esta hablando en Ingles/ francés y no sabe como decir una palabra y/o expresión que hace ud para no interrumpir la comunicación?

_____
_____
_____
_____
_____

2. Siente ud que ha mezclado dos lenguas al participar en alguna actividad oral en salón de clase?_____
_____
_____
_____
_____

GRILEX-SILEX

3. Podría proporcionarme algunos ejemplos en los cuales ud ha mezclado dos lenguas?
_____
_____
_____
_____
_____

4. Se da ud cuenta cuando mezcla dos lenguas en alguna conversación o presentación oral?_____
_____
_____
_____
_____

5. Si se da ud cuenta que hace en ese momento para corregirse y seguir con la conversacion?_____
_____
_____
_____
_____

Aquí concluye la entrevista, le agradezco inmensamente su colaboración y la atención prestada. Quisiera saber si en futuras entrevistas podría contar de nuevo con su colaboración. SI_ NO_.

ENTREVISTA N° 2

Date:_____Hour :_____Site:_____
Focus:_____
Subject:_____
Objective :_____
Interviewee:_____
Interviewer:_____

Las siguientes preguntas tienen como fin recolectar información a cerca de la experiencia de los estudiantes, cuando aprenden inglés-Francés además de ello, saber como se sienten los estudiantes de 4 semestre cuando ponen en práctica las 4 competencias que se requieren al momento de aprender una lengua extranjera. Las mismas se realizan con el fin de dar respuesta a la pregunta del proyecto "HOW DOES CODE SWITCHING AFFECT STUDENTS' PROFICIENCY WHEN LEARNING FOREIGN LANGUAGES?"

La información que usted proporcione en esta entrevista será utilizada únicamente para la colección de datos del estudio previamente citado. Mi interés es aprender de sus experiencias. Todos los comentarios y sugerencias de todos los participantes serán manejados con profesionalidad y confidencialidad.

Ahora siéntase libre y cómodo de responder al siguiente cuestionario. Le agradecería su completa sinceridad.

CUESTIONARIO.

1. Que actividades orales utiliza la profesora para hacer participar a los estudiantes?
   _____
   _____
   _____
   _____

2. Se siente ud nervioso/a cuando habla en ingles en frente de los profesores o compañeros de clase?

   _____
   _____
   _____
   _____
   _____

3. Se siente ud intimidado por las notas que pueda obtener o los errores que pueda cometer cuando habla en lengua

extranjera?_____
_____
_____
_____
_____
_____

4. Siente ud que cuando mezcla dos lenguas es juzgado por el profesor o los compañeros de clase?_____
_____
_____
_____
_____
_____
_____

5. Que tan a menudo participa ud en las actividades orales de las clases en este semestre?
_____
_____
_____
_____
_____
_____
_____

Aquí concluye la entrevista, le agradezco inmensamente su colaboración y la atención prestada. Quisiera saber si en futuras entrevistas podría contar de nuevo con su colaboración. SI__NO___.

ENTREVISTA N° 3

Date:_____**Hour :**_____**Site:**_____
Focus:_____
Subject:_____
Objective :_____
Interviewee:_____
Interviewer:_____

Las siguientes preguntas tienen como fin recolectar información a cerca de la experiencia de los estudiantes, cuando aprenden inglés-Francés además de ello, saber como se sienten los estudiantes de 4 semestre cuando ponen en práctica las 4 competencias que se requieren al momento de aprender una lengua extranjera. Las mismas se realizan con el fin de dar respuesta a la pregunta del proyecto "HOW DOES CODE SWITCHING AFFECT STUDENTS' PROFICIENCY WHEN LEARNING FOREIGN LANGUAGES?"

La información que usted proporcione en esta entrevista será utilizada únicamente para la colección de datos del estudio previamente citado. Mi interés es aprender de sus experiencias. Todos los comentarios y sugerencias de todos los participantes serán manejados con profesionalidad y confidencialidad.

Ahora siéntase libre y cómodo de responder al siguiente cuestionario. Le agradecería su completa sinceridad.

CUESTIONARIO.

1. Siente usted que se queda sin vocabulario más a menudo en ingles o en francés? Por que?
   _____
   _____
   _____
   _____
   _____
   _____

2. Le gusta participar en todas o por lo menos la mayoría de las actividades orales desarrolladas   en   la   clase   si?   no?   Por que?_____
   _____
   _____
   _____
   _____

3. Cuales son las razones principales por las cuales ud no participa tan a menudo en las clases de

ingles?_____
_____
_____
_____
_____
_____
_____

4. Siente ud que cuando mezcla dos lenguas en presentaciones orales ud aprende de una mejor manera?_____
_____
_____
_____
_____
_____
_____

5. Cuales cree ud que son las razones por las cuales mezcla dos lenguas en presentaciones orales?_____
_____
_____
_____
_____
_____

Aquí concluye la entrevista, le agradezco inmensamente su colaboración y la atención prestada. Quisiera saber si en futuras entrevistas podría contar de nuevo con su colaboración. SI__NO___.