Codeswitching and Language Use in the Classroom

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Research in codeswitching in the United States started to unfold when the nation began to address the academic inequalities that make it difficult for Spanish/English bilinguals and speakers of Black English to succeed. In 1954, the groundbreaking Supreme Court decision in Brown vs. Board of Education declared that "separate but equal" education was unconstitutional and required schools to integrate. Title VI of the 1964 Civil Rights Act declared a ban on discrimination on the basis of "race, color, or national origin," and the Bilingual Act of 1974 provided assistance to schools that served linguistic minorities. In 1974, the landmark U.S. Supreme Court decision in Lau vs. Nichols defined the legal responsibilities of schools serving limited-English-proficient students in any federally assisted program. The court declared that children have a civil right to be taught in their home language while they acquire English. Equal access and equal educational opportunity did not mean merely providing students with the same materials, teachers, and facilities. Rather, it required that students be given an educational experience that was socially, linguistically, and academically meaningful. In 1974, the Equal Educational Opportunities Act provided legislative backing to the Lau vs. Nichols Supreme Court decision. It required public school districts to implement programs to meet the needs of bilingual students. In 1975, the Lau Remedies were developed. They provided specific procedures for assessing language proficiency and outlined appropriate instructional treatment and professional standards for teachers of language minority students. Many teachers sought out retraining, especially in Spanish and the native languages of other minority students.

The language of the classroom became an important concern of educators and linguists in the mid 1960s, and by the early 1970s numerous studies were being published. One of the first sources to discuss classroom language using sociolinguistic theory and ethnographic methodology was *Functions of*...
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*Language in the Classroom* by Cazden, Vera, and Hymes (1972). Their edited volume was an outgrowth of a 1965 meeting of anthropologists, linguists, psychologists, and sociologists. The group, called together by Edmund Gordon, and including participants Joshua Fishman, Joan Gussow, Vivian Horner, Alfred Hayes, Courtney Cazden, Dell Hymes, and John Vera "believed that school problems could be better explained by differences in language use between home and school, and the need for future research became a nagging theme throughout our discussions" (Cazden et al. 1972). The participants worked to establish a research agenda for the study of the relationship between children's language use and school success.

When educators began to study the languages, dialects, and registers of their students, they discovered that bilingual students utilize their second language English, their first language, and the alternation of the two, or codeswitching, when interacting with other bilinguals. This phenomenon of codeswitching sparked many new questions. Should codeswitching be permitted in the classroom? What types of codeswitching should be used? Does codeswitching indicate a weakness in the language being acquired? Or is it another resource to be developed and used to the student's advantage?

This article provides an overview of the primary issues surrounding the use of codeswitching in the bilingual classroom. First, I discuss the importance of placing language use in its social context and the value of the ethnographic method for classroom research. I then describe how codeswitching can promote cognitive development, increase comprehension, and mark changes in context. Finally, I explore two central questions facing educators today: what role should codeswitching play in classrooms, and how do we teach bilingual students about the appropriate use of their two languages?

1. Ethnography in the classroom

In the 1960s, the new and blossoming field of theoretical linguistics concentrated on language universals and the capacity of humans to acquire language. Theoretical linguists sought to uncover linguistic competence, rather than performance. At the same time, a field that bridged the gap between what humans are capable of doing with and through language and what they actually do in real social settings was about to be born. This field, called sociolinguistics or the sociology of language, recognized the importance of placing language within the contexts of its use. A central question was appropriateness: where, with whom, and when do people use each variety of the language in question?

In *Functions of Language in the Classroom*, Hymes (1972: xi) notes that few linguists had considered the problems related to language use in classroom settings. Some linguists, he writes, "have come to deny any claim to authority in classroom matters, saying that the present state of linguistic theory is so confused that linguists can tell teachers nothing useful at all." Hymes recognizes
the fact that new research would be necessary if "we are to say something valid and helpful." According to Hymes (1972: xii):

The primary difficulty for linguistics is that such improvements do not depend on language alone, but on language in social context. What is crucial is not so much a better understanding of how language is structured, but a better understanding of how language is used, not so much what language is, as what language is for. Linguists have generally taken questions of use and purpose for granted. They have not related the structure of language to the structure of speaking. Yet if one thing is abundantly clear, it is that the problems in many American classrooms have to do precisely with that relationship.

The task of sociolinguistic research in educational settings, then, is to make "explicit and objectively systematic what speakers of the language, or members of the community, in a sense already know" (Hymes 1972: xv).

In order to study codeswitching in classroom interactions, we need to document conversational and pedagogical language use in context. We must also learn the particular rules that govern interaction and appropriate language use in the classroom setting. To be effective, the study of functions of language in the classroom must focus on all the different forms of communication that take place in educational settings. These must include small and large group instruction, teacher interaction with individuals in private and public contexts, peer tutoring sessions, and other child/child interactions. Codeswitching may occur in none, some, or all of these contexts.

Ethnography can be a powerful method of gaining insight into classroom interactions. Traditionally, ethnography was only used by anthropologists to study cultures other than their own. However, the ethnographic study of classroom interaction gained popularity in the early 1970s.

Carrasco (1984: 19) notes that "the central aim of ethnography is to understand another way of life from the native point of view." Ethnography can be used as a collaborative tool that allows the practitioner and researcher to examine the classroom together, from both emic and etic perspectives, as outsider and insider. When the teachers are engaged in teaching, they rarely notice their own or their students’ language behavior. The ethnographer’s observations allow the teacher to see his or her own behavior as an outsider and to become aware of the quality of interaction during daily activities. This opportunity for self-reflection helps to develop an "expanded awareness" (Carrasco 1981) of individual student competencies and can have an immediate effect on teacher (and student) behavior. In particular, it can make teachers
aware that codeswitching is an effective communicative and pedagogical strategy.

It is also important to view classroom language in its wider social context. Gumperz and Hernández-Chávez (1972) and Blom and Gumperz (1972) show that codeswitching patterns among adults in bidialectal/bilingual contexts outside the classroom also hold true for the bilingual classroom. The more we know about how language is used in the surrounding communities, the more we will be able to understand the functions of codeswitching in the classroom.

Each linguistic community is different and continues to change. While research in one community at a particular moment in time might shed light on the linguistic reality of another, specific recommendations about language use and codeswitching in the classroom must be predicated upon research in that community and the schools within it. Contextual information about the overall linguistic reality of a community must include:

1. the social, cultural, political, linguistic, and economic characteristics of the individuals and communities involved,
2. the attitudes of the minority linguistic community toward codeswitching, its own language(s), bilingualism, and the language of the mainstream, or perhaps the official language of a nation,
3. the language and overall attitudes of the majority community toward the various groups and their languages,
4. the educational opportunities within and outside the communities in question,
5. the opportunities available to access linguistic resources within and outside the communities, and
6. the overall relationships between the communities and their members.

2. Codeswitching and cognitive development

Early studies on codeswitching were undertaken to investigate whether bilingualism itself causes bilinguals to lag behind the majority in school achievement. The low achievement of some bilinguals may be attributed to differences between home and school culture, low socioeconomic class and low self-esteem. It may also be caused by the differential treatment of minorities in schools. It is not true, however, that bilingualism impedes students’ ability to learn.

If codeswitching were detrimental to the child’s linguistic, cognitive, or academic development, it would be necessary to discourage its use, at least in academic settings. However, there is no research whatsoever that indicates any negative effects of codeswitching on linguistic or academic achievement or cognitive development. In fact, bilingual teachers and students who codeswitch
often demonstrate a particular sensitivity to the nuances of language. They are also acutely aware of the grammar of codeswitching. A codeswitch cannot just take place anywhere in a sentence. It needs to occur at appropriate places. Nuances, for example, can be switched relatively easily according to context, but other types of switches require specific conditions (Barkin and Rivas 1978, Poplack 1978, 1980, Lipski 1978, 1982). Only certain codeswitches are considered acceptable to native speakers who codeswitch (Aguirre 1976).

Sociolinguistic research has developed a basic explanation of codeswitching in bilingual communities: (1) speakers who codeswitch between languages are indeed bilingual, perhaps with varying degrees of proficiency in the two languages, (2) these bilinguals interact with each other, and (3) when they do interact with one another, their communicative needs may be met by either of the two languages alone, but are often more appropriately and comfortably met when the two languages are used alternately. Codeswitching represents a third or additional code available to bilinguals in certain social circumstances.

Genishi (1976) hypothesizes that children may begin to learn situational as well as conversational switching at a very early age. In an environment where codeswitching is used as part of the family’s verbal repertoire, it is also acquired by their children (Huerta-Macías 1981). It differs significantly from the kind of language mixing found in early simultaneous and sequential bilingual acquisition. When children learn codeswitching from their parents, their codeswitching is seldom ungrammatical and is used in adult-like ways. For example, these children use codeswitching as a strategy to mark changes in context.

Hudelson (1983) shows that classroom codeswitching behavior can be used as an assessment tool for the Spanish and English development of bilingual students. She illustrates how Beto, a bilingual eight-year-old, switches codes depending upon the language ability of particular individuals. He can speak either language without inserting elements from the other. When he does choose to codeswitch, he codeswitches according to the norms of interaction appropriate for his home and learning communities. Hudelson’s study demonstrates “that children in bilingual classrooms possess sociolinguistic skills not evidenced by test scores” (Hudelson 1983: 48). Ethnographic monitoring and taped language interactions can help train teachers to tune in to what their students are doing and saying (Carrasco, Vera, and Cazden 1981). In this way, teachers may acquire more realistic pictures of their pupils’ abilities and provide more opportunities for children to demonstrate and increase their bilingual skills.

3. The functions of codeswitching

3.1. Codeswitching to increase comprehension

Bilinguals use the language that the people they speak to know best. They are aware that in order to communicate with monolingual English speakers, they
must speak in English and only in English. Similarly, Spanish is the language of interaction with monolingual Spanish speakers. When bilinguals of the same languages interact with each other, codeswitching is often the appropriate and preferred code.

Children are extremely sensitive to language use around them. Genishi (1976) found that children at a kindergarten and affiliated day care center where maintenance of Chicano/Mexican culture is emphasized generally followed the situational rule "Speak the language your listener knows best." This finding holds true in other classroom settings (Cazden 1988, Carrasco 1984, Olmedo-Williams 1980). For example, Feldman and Wertsch (1972) notes that five-year-old bilingual Spanish/English kindergarten children know not to speak Spanish with strangers, although they codeswitch among themselves to emphasize points, to quote directly from another's speech, and to single out an addressee. Mallory (1971) documents that during role-play children choose Spanish or English depending on the person and the situation to be simulated, and they can even explain reasons for their choices. Shultz (1975) notes that children are highly sensitive to the addressee's language ability, and use the language they determine to be the stronger language.

Codeswitching also occurs when one speaker uses one language consistently, while the second persists in using another language. For example, grandparents may use their first, stronger, or only productive language when interacting with their grandchildren, while the latter answer in English. Both speakers have well-developed receptive skills for both languages. They understand what they hear, but must switch languages to answer because they can only speak one language productively. Such is the case with Veronica, as reported in Carrasco 1981. The teacher explains a tutoring task to Veronica in English, which the bilingual child later conveys to her tutee in Spanish. The task, however, involves an English phonics lesson. The teacher never witnesses this switch in languages, nor does she notice Veronica's expertise in teaching the lesson presented to her in English. The teacher, due to her involvement with the research, is surprised to find out that Veronica knows more English than she thought.

Carrasco (1984) notes that lessons occurring predominantly in Spanish may include some codeswitching into English. Often students are beginning to acquire English, but are not yet able or required to use it productively. When the teacher introduces English, even during a Spanish reading lesson, he or she helps the students improve their English comprehension and transfer their Spanish reading skills to reading in English.

3.2. Codeswitching to mark a change in context

Codeswitching is an important discourse strategy in both monolingual and bilingual communities and classrooms. It often marks a change in context, formality, or mood. In monolingual situations, it involves a change in register,
dialect or modality rather than a change in language. Monolingual speakers also utilize switches in body posture, movements, and eye gaze to make a transition from one context to another. Bilinguals use all of these strategies, but also have the option of changing languages.

In a classroom, the setting and participants remain constant. However, linguistic behavior changes as the contexts shift from formal to informal and back again. Teachers proficient in their students' home languages often switch languages to mark context changes, such as the transition from one academic subject to another, or from one topic to another within discussion of a particular academic subject. A codeswitch may indicate that a new person has entered the room. It may also mark a change of attitude. Codeswitches can be used to make a reprimand or praise stand out from the rest of the lesson. Children also use codeswitching to make an utterance stand out. As Genishi (1976: 6) observes, "By changing languages, the child conveys the message, "I really want your attention."

4. Pedagogical approaches

Educators are only beginning to explore codeswitching as a pedagogical strategy to increase language and content acquisition and promote cognitive development. As they create programs for bilingual students, schools must decide how they want each language to be used in the classroom. Milk (1990: 32) describes the importance of the language distribution issue:

Clearly, issues related to language distribution must be at the heart of any substantive discussion of bilingual methodology, for there is no more fundamental decision to be made by a bilingual teacher than which language(s) to use when (i.e. with which subjects), and in what manner (i.e. concurrently or following a strict separation of codes).

Unfortunately, none of the current language distribution models has been studied in depth. Educators do choose particular language distribution models, and often strongly believe that a particular model is effective. However, there is little data on which to base these convictions.

First, some teachers present content in one language, and then directly translate the material into the other language. Some educators believe that direct translation of everything said in one language into the other is an ineffective codeswitching strategy, since it cuts the amount of material a teacher can cover in a lesson period in half. Instead of learning how to express a concept in both languages, students "space out" the information delivered in their weaker language. As Jacobson writes (1990a: 7):
It has been argued that the translation into the child's vernacular of everything that is being taught may prevent him/her from ever developing the kind of English language proficiency that must be one of the objectives of a sound bilingual program.

On the other hand, teachers who directly translate all the material may feel more confident that their students understand the content of the lesson.

Second, many bilingual programs use a language separation approach or LSA. Some programs maintain a one language per subject model. In these situations, students learn history in one language, and science in the other. Other programs provide a one language per teacher model. When students are with teacher A they hear and use English, and when they are with teacher B they hear and use only Spanish. In this model, the English-speaking teacher is frequently monolingual. However, since the school is in the United States, it is more than likely that the Spanish-speaking teacher can speak English. Especially if the Spanish-speaking teacher is from the bilingual community served by the school, he or she may use codeswitching despite the program's goal of language separation. Jacobson (1990a: 4) has pointed out that the idea that teachers should avoid codeswitching "was felt to be so self-evident that no research was ever conducted to support this argument."

Jacobson (1977a, 1990a, 1990b, 1997) has devised a model of teaching involving concurrent use of two languages, "where a highly structured approach to codeswitching is introduced." He proposes that there be "no intra-sentential codeswitching, the alternation is not random but purposeful, the use of both languages is fully balanced and the structure of the lesson does not encourage the child to tune out whilst his/her weaker language is spoken." (Jacobson 1990: 7). He believes that the New Concurrent Approach, or NCA, increases academic learning time, thereby increasing the acquisition of content. Moreover, by providing equal status for the two languages and a climate conducive to the use of the home language, the NCA encourages a closer relationship between school and community and further acquisition of both languages (Milh 1980). The NCA model requires highly trained and linguistically proficient bilingual teachers.

This kind of codeswitching resembles Cazden's scaffolds (1988: 101–110). Scaffolds are "a series of questions designed to provide minimum help at first and then increasingly specific help as needed" (1988: 106). In the NCA, the teacher creates a scaffold by using both languages alternately to convey increasingly specific and complex information, while connecting the new information to the information already presented.

When Jacobson compared the effectiveness of the language separation and the concurrent models, he found that "no significant difference emerged between groups regardless of whether the languages were separated or used concurrently" (1990b: 15). He recommends that effective bilingual teaching practices are
better uncovered when researchers shift their focus from "Which language should I use?" to "How can learning best be achieved?" (Jacobson 1990b: 33). Ultimately, the acquisition of the skills necessary to function in an academic environment is the goal. If codeswitching enhances learning and helps children acquire the skills they need to succeed, then it should be considered an essential part of bilingual teachers’ verbal repertoire. It should also be covered in training programs for bilingual teachers.

I would take Jacobson’s argument one step further. According to the NCA, language alternation should only occur intersententially. When Milk analyzed the use of Spanish and English in two NCA classrooms, he found that only 2.2% of the teachers’ 3450 alternations were intrasentential. However, research suggests that educators’ fear that intrasentential switches will result in ungrammatical language is unfounded. Functionally bilingual individuals are able to codeswitch without violating the grammatical principles of either language. Therefore, if intrasentential switches will help bilingual children learn, then they too should be welcomed in the bilingual classroom.

5. Codeswitching, power, and appropriate language use

School is one of the principal environments where children acquire new registers. One of the objectives of schooling is to help expand children’s repertoires, so that they will be able to communicate appropriately in a variety of settings. Children need to know where, when, how, and to whom to use which languages as well as which registers of those languages. They also need to learn the appropriate “time and place” to use codeswitching in and out of class. Students tend to follow their teachers’ codeswitching patterns (Valdés-Fallis 1978, Phillips 1975). Whether they intend to or not, bilingual teachers model appropriate language use for their students.

Timm (1993) points out that while codeswitching represents a valuable communication strategy among bilinguals, it is often considered problematic when used by teachers and students in bilingual classrooms. Timm notes that when the teacher accepts codeswitching in the classroom it “will probably be conducive to a more relaxed classroom atmosphere, which, in turn, can enhance learning” (1993: 107). However, she argues that codeswitching as “an intimate and spontaneous form of communication among people who feel comfortable with one another” (1993: 108) may not be possible in the classroom between teacher and student, since the relationship between teachers and students is implicitly one of social distance. Because codeswitching is a somewhat informal register, bilingual teachers may avoid codeswitching in situations that require formality.

Timm also argues that teachers can better help their students if they are aware of parental and community attitudes toward codeswitching. She suggests that teachers and parents should communicate with each other about what research says about codeswitching. They should also have the opportunity to
share their own attitudes about the role of codeswitching both in the home and in the school. Timm notes that even when codeswitching is frequently used at home, parents may consider it inappropriate at school.

Sapiens (1982) finds that English is used twice as often as Spanish for delivery of key concepts and for classroom management (see also Phillips 1975 and Valdés-Fallis 1978). This approach to language use in the classroom appears to foster further development of English and a language shift from Spanish to English for academic purposes. When English is the principal language used for establishing control over the class and for conveying key concepts, students also learn that English is the language of power. Researchers have also found that bilingual teachers tend to codeswitch more often during Spanish instruction than during English instruction, a pattern that tells students that English is preferred. If bilingualism is to be nurtured and encouraged, a more equitable language distribution model must be employed.

At the same time, bilingual students are aware of the power of knowing another language in a monolingual environment. Carrasco (1984) describes an incident where during a lesson taught by a monolingual English-speaking teacher, students switch to Spanish to interact socially about an off-task topic. The students cleverly use the rhythmic English reading lesson sentences to transition over to a similar-sounding rhythmic Spanish utterance. The students use codeswitching to undermine the teacher’s authority by mocking her and the lesson. Since the teacher does not speak Spanish, she does not understand the content of their off-task conversation. Nevertheless, it serves as an annoyance and distraction, especially since 20% of the students’ utterances in this lesson are in Spanish, unlike the 4-5% in previous lessons. Here, codeswitching is used to exclude the teacher and to sabotage the lesson.

6. Conclusion

Language use in multilingual classrooms must be pedagogically and linguistically sound, culturally relevant, and socially responsive. It must involve well-trained teachers who understand the sociocultural reality of their students and know how to appropriately interact within the greater community while using linguistic strategies which support bilingualism and cognitive development. Language use in the classroom must not only mirror the community’s language use but also must provide an effective model and learning environment for bilingual students. When researchers are knowledgeable about all aspects of the surrounding communities and how they interact, they can help teachers respond to the linguistic and cultural realities of their students. Such knowledge can help make the classroom a place where we promote equality and try to avert the prejudices often found outside the school.
Notes


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