

## CODE SWITCHING AMONG MALAYSIAN PRIMARY SCHOOL TEACHERS IN TEACHING ENGLISH AS A SECOND LANGUAGE

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Teachers play an important role in delivering language lessons. Many teachers have been found to be using code switching as a tool in their English classrooms. Many studies pertaining to this issue have been conducted at the tertiary and secondary school levels. However, few studies have been conducted at the primary level, particularly in suburban or rural schools in Malaysia. This study was conducted to examine teachers' perception on the practice of code switching in the primary Malaysian ESL classroom and to identify the functions for the use of code switching. A total of 76 primary school English language teachers (English option and non-English option) from suburban and rural schools in Limbang, Sarawak were purposely selected to participate in this study. A survey questionnaire was used to gather the data from the participants. In addition, three English teachers were chosen to take part in the interview sessions to obtain more in-depth information on the use of code switching. The results of the study showed that a majority of the participants viewed code switching as a positive tool in teaching. However, 80.2% of the participants believed that teachers should minimise code switching in the ESL classroom. Teachers were found to practice code switching mainly to increase learner understanding of the subject matter and to help learners with low levels of English proficiency. While code switching may be a useful teaching tool in the ESL classroom, it needs to be limited to only certain situations and specific purposes.

**Keywords:** Code Switching; Primary School Teachers; ESL Classrooms; Bilingualism.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

The English language is important for students to acquire to compete at higher levels of education and for employment purposes (Ji, 2013). Teachers play a crucial role in developing the English language competency of learners. To achieve this objective, they need to implement various teaching approaches and techniques for effective lessons. In light of this need, teachers have been found to use code switching (CS) as a tool in teaching the second language (Lee, 2010). Teachers' perceptions of the use of CS may influence their approach to teaching the English language in their classrooms.

Gardner-Chloros (2009) pointed out that the impetus for debate on code switching began in the work of Gumperz and his associates in the 1960s and early 1970s. Gumperz (1982) defines conversational CS as the use of multiple languages in the same speech which involves the use of different grammatical systems or subsystems. Cook (2008) observed that bilingual or multilingual speakers have

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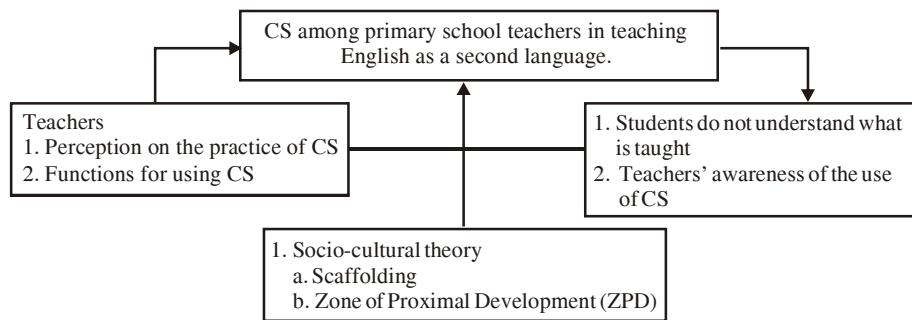
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different linguistic characteristics when compared to monolingual speakers. He suggests that CS is a normal phenomenon in bilingual contexts, defining CS as the use of one language to the other in mid-speech when both speakers share the same two languages.

In Malaysia, a number of studies on the use of CS in an ESL context have been conducted at both the tertiary and secondary school levels (Ariffin and Husin 2011; Azlan and Narasuman 2012; Singh and Nasir 2012; and Nordin *et al.* 2013, among others). However, few studies have been carried out at the primary school examining the nature of CS practice among teachers.

The Malaysian Education Blueprint 2013-2025 reported that based on the Cambridge Placement Test (CPT) results, of 7500 participants a significant number of English teachers failed to meet the minimum proficiency requirement (Ministry of Education Malaysia 2013). According to McMillan and Rivers (2011), the overuse of CS due to limited English language proficiency among English teachers may affect their ability to deliver effective teaching and learning lessons. However, Cook (2001) argues that other than low English language proficiency, some specific and meaningful purposes for the use of CS may be among the reasons behind its use.



**Figure 1:** Conceptual Framework

### 1.1 Objectives of the Study

The objectives of the study are as follows:

- (i) To examine teachers' perceptions of the practice of code-switching in primary Malaysian ESL classrooms
- (ii) To identify the functions for using code switching among primary school teachers in the Malaysian ESL classroom

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The use of CS in the ESL classroom has been a much-debated issue among scholars, particularly in the second language learning and bilingual fields of study

(Chowdhury, 2013). Palmers (as cited in Algarin-Ruiz, 2014) argues that the use of CS in the ESL classroom highlights the linguistic weaknesses of the teachers. Bilingual teachers often attempt to reduce or overcome this language limitation by resorting to CS.

Modupeola (2013) and Cook (2008) observed that the practice of code-switching usually occurs unconsciously in bilingual classrooms. This may be due to factors intended to develop students' understanding, facilitate learning for low proficiency learners, and to ensure a smooth flow of the lessons. However, McMillan and Rivers (2011) consider the use of CS in the classroom to be counter-productive practice in the learning process, only to be used as a last resort.

Flyman-Mattsson and Burenhult (1999) mentioned that there are three types of CS, mainly topic switch, affective switch, and repetitive switch. Topic switching may occur when the teacher tries to alter the use of language to accommodate the topic during the lesson. On the other hand, affective switching helps the teacher to use CS to show their emotions and build good rapport between teachers and students. Repetitive switching is used to clarify the gist of the lesson for better understanding among students. Ferguson (2003) suggests that the functions of CS may be divided into three main categories:

1. code switching for curriculum access;
2. code switching for classroom management discourse; and
3. code switching for interpersonal relations.

In summary, based on previous studies conducted by researchers (Modupeola, 2013; Ariffin and Husin, 2011 and Malik, 2010), ten functions of code switching in the classroom may be described as follows:

- (a) to explain the meaning of new or difficult words
- (b) to explain grammar rules
- (c) to give instruction
- (d) to control students' discipline
- (e) to build relationship between teacher and students
- (f) to promote student understanding
- (g) to praise and encourage the students
- (h) to save time
- (i) to repeat the instruction or explanation
- (j) to cater students with low proficiency in target language

Teacher perceptions of the use of CS in the classroom may influence its usage during lessons. Bilgin (2016) found that teaching experience and previous language learning experiences had major influence on student teachers' belief on code switching. Teachers were found to view code switching as a positive tool in teaching grammar rules and in introducing new lexical items (Yao, 2011).

Scaffolding focuses on social and instructional support in developing learners' knowledge of new concepts. It is viewed as a teaching strategy originating from Vygotsky's sociocultural theory and his concept of Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) (Yamat *et al.*, 2011). Brown (2007) defined ZPD as 'the distance between learners' existing developmental state and their potential development'. Meanwhile, Kagan (1995) in her discussion on ZPD mentioned two different levels in learners' learning progress: the developmental level and proximal level. The developmental level referred to a stage where the learners are able to complete a task independently. Meanwhile, proximal level refers to a condition in which learners need to be given support in completing this stage of the learning process.

Van de Pol, Volman and Beishuizen (2010) state that the concept of scaffolding is a metaphor taken from the use of scaffold as a temporary structure in the process of building construction or modification of another structure. Yamat *et al.* (2011) indicates that teachers construct a scaffold to facilitate learners' prior knowledge and bridge the gap between existing and new knowledge. Besides that, a scaffolding should not be treated as a permanent helper for learners. Instead, teachers need to reduce such support (here, code switching) gradually as competency increases (Yamat *et al.* 2011 and Englishtina *et al.* 2016).

### 3. METHODOLOGY

Data for the study were collected through a survey questionnaire. Interviews were also conducted to gather data. 76 primary English teachers (English option and non-option teachers) were chosen as the participants for this research. The participants were purposely selected from primary schools in sub urban and rural areas in Limbang, Sarawak. For the interviews, three English teachers were recruited by the researcher. Respondents have been teaching English for 9 years, 4 years and 3 years, respectively.

The survey questionnaire was adapted from past studies by Malik (2010), Lee (2010), Flyman-Mattsson and Burenhult (1999) and Ferguson (2003) in their research on CS. The survey was divided into three sections: demographics/background of the participants, teachers' perceptions on the use of code switching in the ESL classroom, and the functions for using code switching among teachers. A 5-point Likert Scale was used in the questionnaire in section two and section three. Prior to actual data collection, the questionnaire was reviewed by two experts to ensure content validity and face validity. Based on the experts' suggestions, some changes were made to improve the questionnaire. A pilot test was conducted with 12 primary English teachers and was analysed with Cronbach's alpha coefficient. The Cronbach's alpha coefficient was ( $R = 0.965$ ), demonstrating that the questionnaire is highly reliable.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted to collect the data. The items for the interviews were prepared before the interview sessions. Additionally, during

the sessions participants were given freedom to provide further explanations based on the questions given. The data from the questionnaires were analysed using descriptive statistics. The results of the interviews were analysed thematically.

#### 4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Table 1 displays teachers' perceptions on the use of code switching in ESL classrooms. Based on the results from the questionnaire, in general, a majority of the participants showed positive perceptions towards the use of code CS in the ESL classroom. A total of 72.4% of the participants agreed that the use of code switching helps increase learners' understanding. During the interview sessions, all respondents mentioned that they viewed code switching as a way to create meaningful lesson. Respondent A stated that

“language is not the only focus in ESL classroom because teacher also need to create meaningful content and code switching is one of the way for us to achieve it.”

The finding of this study found that 44.6% of the participants responded negatively to the statement that code switching highlights the linguistic weaknesses of the teacher. Even though most participants had a positive perception on code switching, 80.2% of the participants believed that teachers need to minimise code switching in ESL classroom and 64.5% of them stressed that teachers should use code switching only for weak language learners. This situation showed teachers' awareness on the practice of code switching in the classroom. They were also aware of the importance of exposing their learners to the target language as much as possible. This finding is consistent with a study by Yao (2011).

TABLE 1: TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS ON THE USE OF CODE SWITCHING

<i>Teachers' reasons for code switching:</i>	<i>Strongly disagree and disagree (%)</i>	<i>Neutral (%)</i>	<i>Strongly agree and agree (%)</i>
To help increase learners' understanding	7.9	19.7	72.4
To help build good rapport with students	9.1	30.3	60.6
To help develop students' interest in learning English	22.3	13.2	64.5
CS is a common practice in ESL classrooms.	14.5	19.7	65.8
To highlight teachers' linguistic weaknesses	44.6	24.3	31.1
To provide good learning atmosphere	8.1	37.3	54.6
To hinder learners' language development	21.9	31.5	46.6
CS is an effective teaching tool.	17.3	24	58.7
CS is unavoidable.	10.4	30.3	59.3
Should be used only for weak learners.	14.4	21.1	64.5
CS pollutes the language.	49.4	16	34.6
<i>In my opinion:</i>			
A teacher should minimize code switching.	5.3	14.5	80.2
Only English is supposed to be used in ESL classrooms.	17	21.1	61.9

Table 2 illustrates the functions for teachers in using CS. As shown in Table 2, more than 60% of the participants use CS in the range from ‘sometimes’ to ‘always’ for all items. In addition, participants indicated that they use code switching ‘a lot of times’ to facilitate learning among low proficiency students (44.7%). During the interview session, Respondent B mentioned that “... previously I taught in rural school (learners with low level of proficiency), and I practice code switching more frequent as compared to my current school because I felt disappointed when my students cannot understand my instructions.” Teachers usually use code switching to accommodate learners with low level of proficiency (Modupeola, 2013 and Cook, 2008).

TABLE 2: TEACHERS’ CODE SWITCHING FOR CURRICULUM ACCESS

<i>I use code switching to:</i>	<i>Never</i> (%)	<i>Rarely</i> (%)	<i>Sometimes</i> (%)	<i>A lot of times</i> (%)	<i>Always</i> (%)
Explain the activity to my students	2.6	19.7	47.4	22.4	7.9
Give instruction for complicated task	2.6	15.8	38.2	34.2	9.2
Check students’ understanding	6.6	18.4	46.1	26.3	2.6
Explain new words	3.9	13.2	46.1	27.6	9.2
Explain grammar rules	4.0	21.3	40.0	28.0	6.7
Reduce time in explaining difficult words	2.6	21.1	39.5	26.3	10.5
Facilitate low proficiency students	0	5.3	32.9	44.7	17.1

Table 3 shows the function of CS for management of classroom discourse. 52.6% of the participants indicated that they never or rarely use CS to save time in giving instructions. Respondent C stated that “I usually used code switching when my students could not understand my instruction in English after I repeated it for a few times.” In addition, 50% of the participants indicated that they used code ‘sometimes’ to enhance students’ engagement in the activities. The participants displayed a lower frequency of CS use for management of classroom discourse compared with the use of CS for curriculum access.

TABLE 3: TEACHERS’ CODE SWITCHING FOR MANAGEMENT OF CLASSROOM DISCOURSE

<i>I use code switching to:</i>	<i>Never</i> (%)	<i>Rarely</i> (%)	<i>Sometimes</i> (%)	<i>A lot of times</i> (%)	<i>Always</i> (%)
Organise the classroom setting	16.0	32.0	38.7	12.0	1.3
Save time in giving instructions	15.8	36.8	30.3	17.1	0
Get the students into desirable groups	17.3	33.3	38.7	9.3	1.3
Maintain classroom rules among students	13.2	31.6	38.2	13.2	3.9
Enhance students’ engagement in the activities	7.9	21.1	50.0	15.8	5.3

Besides using CS for curriculum access and management of classroom discourse, participants also indicated that they use CS for affective switching, as

illustrated in Table 4. A high percentage of participants (65.8%) stated that they never or rarely use CS to praise their students. Based on the results of the questionnaire, most of the participants (39.5% to 47.4%) mentioned that they use code switching ‘sometimes’ to discipline students, to build good rapport with students, to decrease students’ level of anxiety, and to provide opportunities for students to communicate naturally. During an interview session, respondent B stated that

“code switching is a way for me to communicate with my students because English is a very alien language for them”.

Sert (as cited in Modupeola, 2013) indicated that developing good communication skills will help the teachers build good relationships with their students.

TABLE 4: TEACHERS’ CODE SWITCHING FOR AFFECTIVE SWITCH

<i>I use code switching to:</i>	<i>Never (%)</i>	<i>Rarely (%)</i>	<i>Sometimes (%)</i>	<i>A lot of times (%)</i>	<i>Always (%)</i>
Control students’ discipline	13.2	26.3	40.8	17.1	2.6
Praise my students	34.2	31.6	21.1	10.5	2.6
Attract students’ attention	22.4	30.3	31.6	13.2	2.6
Build good rapport with my students	11.8	27.6	39.5	15.8	5.3
Decrease students’ level of anxiety	9.2	27.6	42.1	17.1	3.9
Provide opportunity for students to communicate naturally	9.2	22.4	47.4	18.4	2.6

**5. CONCLUSION**

Based on the findings of this study, it may be concluded that primary English language teachers have positive perceptions of the use of CS in the ESL classroom. CS has been found to be used for various functions. However, a majority of the participants in the study agreed that CS is used more frequently to accommodate curriculum access and to facilitate learning among learners with low levels of proficiency. Analysis of the data from the interviews with the three respondents showed that all the participants concurred that teachers should minimise the use of CS. It should be kept in reserve and used in teaching only when necessary. Therefore, this study supports the use of CS in helping to increase students’ language understanding and development. However, it should be used judiciously and remain limited to specific pedagogical situations and purposes.

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