Adult Learners' Code-Switching in the EFL Classroom: An Analysis of Frequency and Type of Code-Switching

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Abstract : Stepping into various English as foreign language classrooms, one will see some fundamental similarities. There will likely be groups of students working collaboratively, possibly sitting at tables together. They will be using a set coursebook or photocopies of materials developed by publishers or the teacher. The teacher will be carefully monitoring students' behaviour and progress. The teacher will also likely be insisting that the students only speak English together, possibly having implemented a complex penalty and award systems to encourage this. This is communicative language teaching and it is commonly how foreign languages are taught around the world. Recently, there has been much interest in the codeswitching behaviour of learners in foreign or second language classrooms. It is a significant topic as it relates to second language acquisition theory, language teaching training and policy, and student expectations and classroom practice. Generally in an English as a foreign language context, an 'English Only' policy is the norm. This is based on historical factors, socio-political influence and theories surrounding language learning. The trend, however, is shifting and, based on these same factors, a re-examination of language use in the foreign language classroom is taking place. This paper reports the findings of an examination into the codeswitching behaviour of learners with a shared native language in an English classroom. Specifically, it addresses the question of classroom code-switching by adult learners in the EFL classroom during student-to-student, spoken interaction. Three generic categories of code switching are proposed based on published research and classroom practice. Italian adult learners at three levels were observed and patterns of language use were identified, recorded and analysed using the proposed categories. After observations were completed, a questionnaire was distributed to the students focussing on attitudes and opinions around language choice in the EFL classroom, specifically, the usefulness of L1 for specific functions in the classroom. The paper then investigates the relationship between learners' foreign language proficiency and the frequency and type of code-switching that they engaged in, and the relationship between learners' attitudes to classroom code-switching and their behaviour. Results show that code switching patterns underwent changes as the students' level of English language proficiency improved, and that students' attitudes towards code-switching generally correlated with their behaviour with some exceptions, however. Finally, the discussion focusses on the details of the language produced in observation, possible influencing factors that may affect the frequency and type of code switching that took place, and additional influencing factors that may affect students' attitudes towards code switching in the foreign language classroom. An evaluation of the limitations of this study is offered and some suggestions are made for future research in this field of study.

Keywords : code-switching, EFL, second language aquisition, adult learners
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