

Code-Switching in Foreign Language Classes

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Language immersion during class time is currently considered the best foreign language teaching method, but using only the target language during class is rare. While some studies have examined patterns of code-switching in K–12 schools and non-academic settings, few have examined such behavior in college classrooms. This study considers language-internal and language-external factors that govern code-switching for college students and teachers in one beginner and one advanced Italian language classroom. The collected data reveals code-switching patterns and evidence that code-switching in advanced language classes can enhance communication in both the native and target languages.

Brigham Young University (BYU) is home to one of the most diverse language programs in the United States. Its course offerings range from Afrikaans to Welsh, and over 130 languages are spoken on campus. However, no matter the language being taught, the teaching method is generally the same: immersion. Language immersion has been proven to improve reading and listening comprehension as well as provide students with countless opportunities for language improvement (Savage, 2014, pp. 109–110). These benefits, along with guidance from the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (Lloyd, 2016, p. 1), have pushed department heads and training programs to insist on language immersion in foreign language classes at BYU. While complete language immersion during class is ideal, it is not the reality. Small instances of code-switching do occur, even in the highest levels of foreign language classes.

Gardner-Chloros defines code-switching as “the use of several languages or dialects in the same conversation or sentence by bilingual people” (2009, p. 4). In foreign language immersion classes, this means speaking the L1 (the native or first language) in a context where the L2 (the target or second language) is expected. Because this is technically not supposed to happen, it is important to understand what motivates code-switching in foreign language classes and what patterns govern it.

Lloyd’s study on foreign language use in the classroom found several factors that influence the teacher when choosing to use the L1 or the L2. These factors included students’ level of language ability, complexity of the academic task being performed, and restrictions of time (2016, pp. 46, 57). However, this research was conducted in a variety of foreign language K–12 classrooms and included only limited information about foreign language classes at the university level.

Gardner-Chloros also comments that in language immersion schools, code-switching can be used by teachers to include students with varying levels of language capability, ensure students less competent in the L2 understand at least a portion of the instruction, and even inadvertently reflect

code-switching practices outside of the classroom (2009, p. 159). Students participate in code-switching as well, but they are more likely to switch to their L1 for content words if they are less comfortable with the L2 and for function words if they are more comfortable with the L2 (161).

Both of these studies are helpful in determining several motivating factors for code-switching, but neither observes code-switching in a university-level course where language immersion happens for one hour a day at most. To better understand these patterns in this type of situation, this research will identify patterns in code-switching and propose possible forces behind these patterns as found in two Italian foreign language classes at BYU.

Background

Any situation in which a speaker switches between two or more languages or varieties can be considered code-switching. The code-switching that occurs between languages is often viewed negatively (Bell, 2014, p. 114). These views are age old and may be rooted in feelings of nationalism and us-versus-them mentalities. Until the 1950s, even linguists were influenced by these biases and did not consider studying code-switching, preferring more “pure” language studies. However, linguists have recently become interested in this phenomenon and have studied code-switching in countless contexts to better understand language-internal and language-external mechanisms that often trigger the changes observed in code-switching.

The language-internal and language-external causes of code-switching are varied and nearly infinite. Language-internal mechanisms can include not knowing a word in a language, preferring a simpler syntax or form of expression, or even utilizing words or other morphemes that do not translate well from one language to another. Language-external mechanisms can include the audience or setting, the purpose of the communication, and even the communication of subtle nuances in narration (Bell, 2014, pp. 115–117).

Today, studies in code-switching range from conversational analyses to classroom practices. The phenomenon can be observed between and within most languages, so the possibilities for research are endless and ongoing.

Methods

To better understand the patterns and motivations behind code-switching in foreign language immersion classes, data was collected from two Italian language immersion classes, Italian 101 and Italian 340, both taught at BYU. Italian 101 is a beginner course where students who have no experience speaking Italian learn basic vocabulary and grammar. This course was taught by a student instructor who has about three years of Italian experience and one year of teaching experience. Italian 340 is an advanced language course where advanced speakers study Italian literature. The course was taught by a professor who has about seventeen years of Italian experience and ten years of teaching experience. In both classes, most of the students have English as their L1 and Italian as the L2, or target language, though some students did speak Spanish or Portuguese as a first language.

In each course, a researcher recorded each occurrence of code-switching, the time and date, which individual performed it, what was said, and the context for the code switch. A code switch was considered to be performed each time any participant in the class used English, whether it was an extended discourse or a small morpheme. For the Italian 101 course, one class period was observed. For the Italian 340 class, three class periods were observed.

In addition, a questionnaire about patterns of and attitudes about code-switching was sent to both teachers. Asking about teacher observations and opinions ensured that the patterns observed during class time were consistent with the attitudes of the teachers. The questions included were as follows:

1. When do you use code-switching in your language immersion classes, if ever? Are there specific

situations or audiences that make you more likely to use one language over another?

2. When do you observe students code-switching in your language immersion classes, if ever? Do they use code-switching more in personal conversations with other students, when addressing you, or when addressing the whole class?
3. What patterns do you see in code-switching? Do you or students usually just say one word in a different language, or is it usually a longer phrase? Are words and morphemes from different languages ever combined?
4. In your opinion, does code-switching help or hinder language learning?

One limitation of the observational data was the limited extent to which student code-switching was able to be observed. The classes observed were conducted over the videoconferencing platform Zoom. While this allowed for excellent audio recordings of the teachers, it was often difficult to hear the students. In addition, the use of the “break-out room” feature in Zoom meetings made it so that some groups of students were inaccessible to observation for large portions of the class period. However, even though the data is much more descriptive of teacher code-switching, a few instances of student code-switching were recorded and considered in this study, despite their brevity. Further research could be conducted on the extent to which students participate in code-switching in language immersion courses and in which contexts they feel comfortable doing so.

To analyze the observational data, each recorded observation of code-switching was labeled with information about the speaker, context, switch pattern, and L1 utterance length. It was then possible to see the frequency of each factor for each speaker individually and for each class collectively. By grouping evidence in this way, patterns and possible motivations emerged that were then compared with the responses from the questionnaire. When a pattern was observed in

the observational data and in the teacher questionnaire, it was considered to be confirmed.

Results

The results of this research can be divided into two broad categories. The first is language-internal patterns, and the second is language-external patterns.

Language-internal patterns, or patterns driven by morphology, syntax, grammar, and similar factors intrinsic to the language, were most obvious in the Italian 340 course. The professor of this course answered that he was most likely to switch into the L1 “when a word in English doesn’t translate well to Italian (e.g., ‘awkward’ doesn’t really have a good corresponding word in Italian so I often use the English).” Semantic constraints of the language make a quick switch to the L1 more comfortable and more useful for communication in the foreign language classroom setting. This is clearly seen in the code-switching data for Italian 340. Some phrases uttered by the professor follow a pattern of single-word L1 switches:

- “È uno *stretch* secondo me.” (In my opinion, it’s a stretch.)
- “È sempre importante dare questi *props* dove *props* sono dovuti.” (It’s always important to give these props where props are due.)
- “Abbiamo il nostro *spring break* questo *weekend*.” (We have our spring break this weekend.)

In each of these examples, the speaker switches to L1 to express sentiments, especially slang words, that don’t have a simple equivalent in the L2. A seeming reversal of this pattern can be seen in one instance in which the professor added an L2 morpheme as a suffix onto an L1 word. His utterance included the phrase “spring break*uccio*” (short, insignificant, and laughable spring break) where the L2 morpheme addition allowed for greater nuance than the L1 adjective addition. These examples show that in higher

level L2 classroom experiences, single word code-switching is common to communicate nuances or to express concepts that don't easily translate between the two languages.

Single word code-switching also occurred when discussing resources that were presented in English. For example, one day during the Italian 340 course, the students analyzed a poem written in English. The discussion mostly took place in the L2, but when referring to specific words or phrases in the poem, the students would switch into English to quote the material. For example, one student made the utterance “legge la poesia ‘*Sacrament Prayer*’” (he reads the poem “*Sacrament Prayer*”). Because the student was referring to the title of a poem written in English, he used English to refer to the poem, even though he had the linguistic capability to translate the title if he had needed to.

Similar patterns of switching a single word can be seen in the Italian 101 course, but for a slightly different reason. Code-switching in this class was very rarely used to convey nuance in meaning and was more often used to refer to or define specific vocabulary words. Phrases such as “come si dice *videogames*?” (How do you say videogames?) were very common and included single word code-switching to learn a new vocabulary word or to define unfamiliar vocabulary words. This phenomenon was accurately identified by the instructor, who commented in her questionnaire, “I definitely use English more when we are talking about vocabulary. I sometimes have to define words in English so that students know what I'm talking about. I also have seen that students will switch into English to ask about specific words they haven't learned yet.”

The instructor for this course also inserted single words from Italian into longer phrases in English, as in the phrase “so, *nipote* is kind of a funny one because *nipote* can mean grandchild or niece or nephew.” The insertion of the Italian word *nipote* was a direct reference to the vocabulary being discussed in class that day, showing that classroom discussion of new vocabulary, especially with beginning learners of an L2 language, is a context in which patterns

of single-word code-switching are very common. This pattern was also observed in the Italian 340 course, but not as often. One of the few examples observed was uttered by a student who said, “Sta dicendo, uh, *the futility di essere*” (He’s saying, uh, the futility of being). Unfamiliarity with a vocabulary word caused a single-word code switch to the L1. This is confirmed by the Italian 340 professor response of “for the most part, I think I see students code-switching when they . . . don’t have the vocabulary . . . necessary to convey their thoughts adequately.”

There were also many patterns observed in the language-external factors, or factors related to audience, context, or language task. The most prevalent language-external factors in the collected data were related to audience. Both teachers noted that students were more likely to code switch when speaking with other students. The Italian 340 professor stated, “From my experience, students code switch more in small group work and other personal conversations with students. I think it happens less often when addressing the whole class and when addressing me directly.” The Italian 101 instructor stated, “I often hear students talking in English when they are doing partner work, either to ask questions about what they’re supposed to be doing or to make casual comments throughout their exercises.” Unfortunately, not a lot of data was collected to document this observation due to the restrictions of online learning platforms; however, two short conversations in English were recorded between students. One occurred in the Italian 340 course in a breakout room where the professor was present but not participating. The other occurred in the 101 course between two students working together in a Zoom meeting (but not in a breakout room) while the instructor monitored other students. The ratio of code-switching to L1 was much higher in student-to-student interactions; however, since such little data was collected, it might be wise to repeat the study with better access to conversations between students before confirming these results. The broad scope of this study, which included both beginner and advanced Italian courses, may also have confounded the data.

Another common theme reflected in both the questionnaires and the data was switching to the L1 when the speaker questioned if the audience understood what they were attempting to communicate in the L2. This phenomenon was recorded in the Italian 340 class on several occasions from the professor. One example is in his utterance “*suvverte, cioè subverts la poesia*” (it subverts, that is it subverts the poem). The professor identified this kind of code-switching behavior in his questionnaire when he said, “I will code switch . . . when I’m explaining something and, either by asking questions or by the looks on people’s faces, I feel like I need to clarify something or make sure that students really understand what I am telling them.”

The Italian 101 instructor also commented on code-switching to ensure comprehension, saying, “If I’m talking to students and I can tell that we aren’t on the same page, I will try repeating myself, and then switching to English if they still don’t get it.” This pattern of code-switching is reflected in the data collected from the Italian 101 course, where the instructor frequently switches into the L1 to give more in-depth explanations of directions or instruction originally given in Italian. One such example is in an explanation of the phrase “*la famiglia dello sposo*” (the spouse’s family). After saying this phrase in Italian, the instructor continued to say, “So, if you’re married, this is the family of your husband or your wife.” For both classes, repetition of information in the L1 functions as an emphatic trigger that helps to ensure that everyone is understanding each other.

Conclusion

The data discussed above shows that code-switching in college-level foreign language classes follows many patterns discussed in Lloyd (2016) and Gardner-Chloros (2009). For example, both this study and that of Gardner-Chloros show students code-switching to the L1 for vocab and content words, especially if the students were less comfortable with the L2 (p. 161). In addition, this study corroborated the findings of Lloyd (2016) that teacher code-switching

will often reflect students' level of language ability (p. 46). However, this study also found that code-switching can be influenced by conversational nuance as well as the language of resources used in class discussions. The emphasis of this study on all speakers in the classroom also allowed for some interesting insights about the differences between code-switching in teachers and in students, which could be investigated further to make more sense of why students are more likely to speak in the L1 with each other than with the teacher.

One interesting discovery made during this research was the disparity in code-switching between language-internal and language-external issues. In both levels of the Italian classes studied, the language-external factors were fairly similar. However, when considering language internal factors, differences emerged between advanced and beginning speakers. While this difference is hinted at in the research of Gardner-Chloros (2009), it was not an area of focus. It would be interesting to recreate this study's observation with the intent of describing differences between beginner and advanced L2 language speakers.

In closing, it is important to note that, while this paper began by describing the value of language immersion, both teachers that were observed in this study commented on the value of code-switching. The push for one hundred percent communication in the target language is admirable, but it may sacrifice opportunities for students to make connections between languages and express themselves fully in a way that is meaningful to them and those in their classrooms. The Italian 340 professor may have expressed these sentiments best in his questionnaire. After discussing the value of circumlocution and new vocabulary acquisition in foreign language learning, he commented, "To some extent, I suppose code-switching has the ability to highlight where the L2 'falls short' in its ability to adequately express ideas or meaning and I think that in itself can lead to learning moments."

References

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